

gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

July/August 2015

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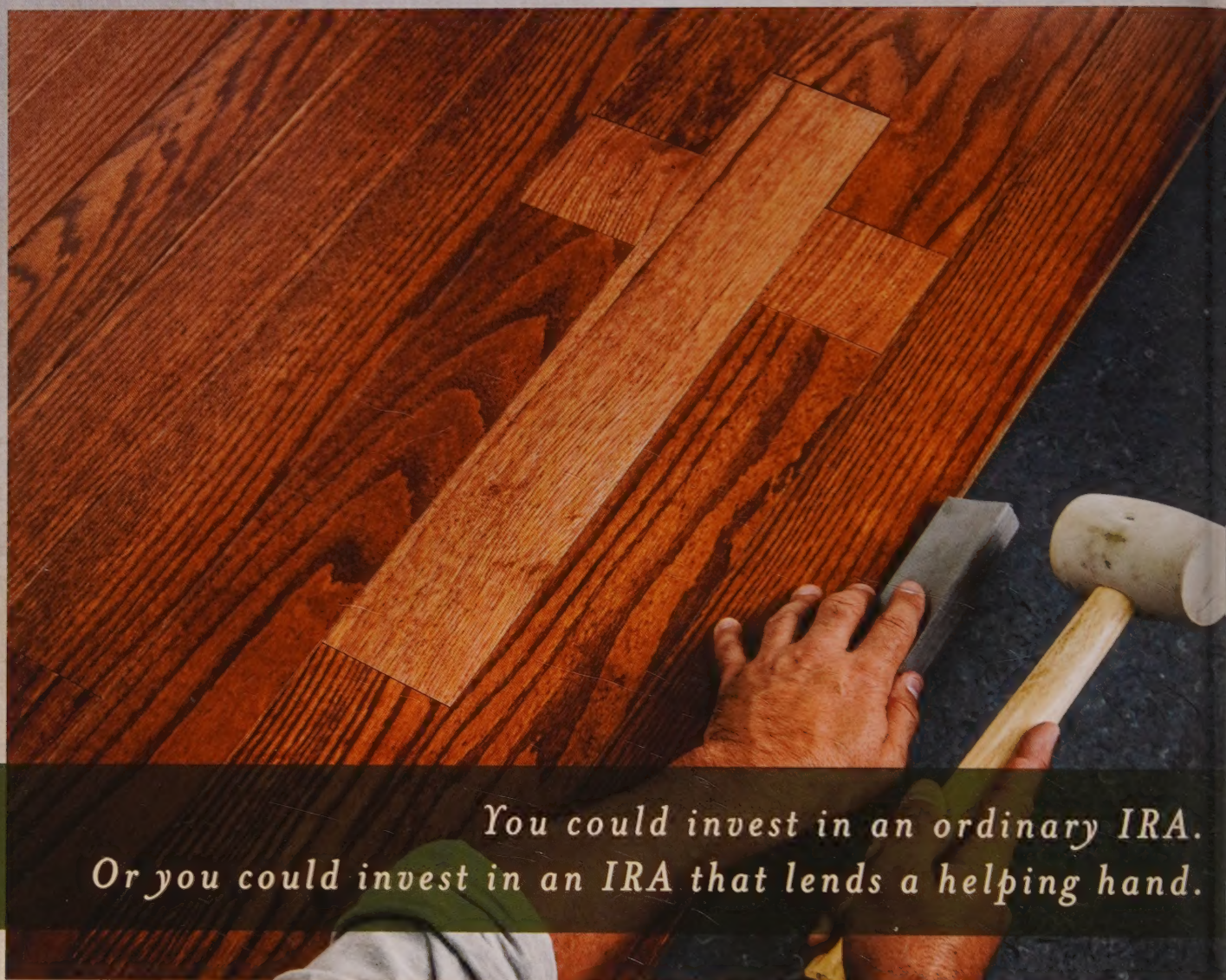
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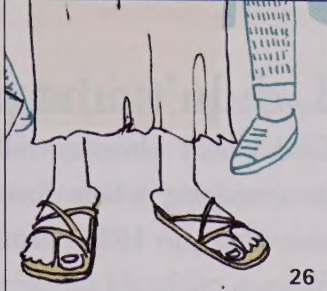
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Art Direction On Track Marketing
Cover moxiegirl12
gathermagazine.org

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VOICES

Thank You, Church Women

by Elizabeth Hunter

I didn't imagine that God would someday call me to serve as managing editor for *Gather* magazine when, in 1999, I attended my first Women of the ELCA triennial with my mom. I also found time to volunteer in the Women of the ELCA newsroom, which at that time published a daily paper for participants.

It was an honor to interview Myrlie Evers-Williams, past NAACP chair and widow of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers. I was so proud of the prophetic stands taken by Women of the ELCA delegates as they passed resolutions related to international debt forgiveness and anti-racism. I watched and listened as they put their treasure where they wanted their hearts to be, to paraphrase ELCA theologian and *Gather* contributor Mark Allan Powell.

The triennial was the best church event ever. No surprise there. Why? Because these strong, bold women of faith were the same Lutheran women (just more of them!) who surrounded me as a child while I played on the floor at my mom's church meetings or read "Choose Your Own Adventure" books at Grandma's women's circle when the Bible studies inside *Scope* magazine (a *Gather* predecessor) grew too long.

Their talk, their walk, their hymn-singing, and even their quilts were familiar. Those delegates and many of the speakers were part of a long line of generations of church women who acted boldly on their faith by sending missionaries, campaigning for justice, launch-

ing social ministries, founding schools, preaching the Word, and more.

Without the foresight and funding of faithful church women, there wouldn't have been a Lutheran mission congregation for me to grow up in or a "Church and World" section of *The Lutheran* magazine (my reporting and editing "beat" for the last 16 years). Nor would my former colleagues and I have been able to publish (for eight years) another magazine, *The Little Lutheran*, serving children age 6 and younger.

The faith and actions of women in our church are supported by Bible studies and stories of both comfort and challenge in *Gather* magazine. Every issue is intended to help us deepen our faith and take action in God's world. According to my predecessor, Terri Lackey, who now serves as communications director for the Women of the ELCA, *Gather* has a pass-along rate of 3. On average, subscribers share their magazines (and thus, their faith) with three other people each month.

When I'm not working, I attend Holy Family Lutheran Church in Chicago. My husband, Leslie, and I have two sons, ages 11 and 8, who contrive to keep us busy with soccer, scouting, science experiments and questions about God.

As the newbie on staff, I'm continuing to learn about putting this inspirational magazine together. I'm looking forward to hearing from you as well. So please write us at gather@elca.org and share your hopes as well as ideas for stories, writers, and Bible studies. ☸

Elizabeth Hunter is managing editor of *Gather*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

The Unexpected Gift of Silence

by Anna Grunner

If you asked me what giving means, my first impulse would be to say something about material things. But I have been thinking recently about how giving extends to immaterial things. That is, what do you give when the need reaches beyond not only what hands can hold—but beyond what hearts can hold?

When Job's friends heard of all the harm that had come upon him, each one came from his place ... and they gathered to console him and comfort him.

I have this amazing group of friends. Over many years, we have walked together through a lot of heartache. There's the stuff of everyday life: vocational aches, rough patches in relationships, anxieties, missed opportunities. We constantly see each other through these things. Then there are the moments that stop us in our tracks: a parent dies early, a marriage turns abusive, cancer before 30, miscarriage, divorce.

They raised their eyes from afar but they were not able to recognize him. So they raised their voices and wept; each one tore his cloak and threw dust heavenward onto his head.

In seminary, a beloved professor once reminded us that, "if everyone in the classroom were to share their greatest heartache, there would be grief enough to freeze the blood." Silence lingered in the room after that sentence. It must have been five whole seconds—a long time for people to be silent ... right?

They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights; no one spoke a word, because they saw how great the suffer-

ing had become.

Stop. Look at what that says. *No one spoke a word for seven days and seven nights.* I cannot imagine that. The urge to comfort is often the urge to speak. Not having something to say feels like a failure. But Job's friends found him *beyond their ability to recognize him.* They knew somehow that speaking in this instance would be the failure. This is their best moment.

"My anger is kindled against you because you did not speak rightly of me, as my servant Job did."

But their way doesn't prevail. Once Job speaks, this silence vanishes like a fleeting moment rather than a span of heartache-laden days. And Job wants to be engaged. He asks for God's answer but gets his friends' views. While their speech is not what Job needed, their viewpoint *is* from rich theological tradition that sees the hand of God as active in human history in a transparent way. They were trying to offer a word about a world that is intelligible, one in which Job has a place.

So while these isolated moments of silence aren't much and aren't their legacy, I'm urged toward a more responsive way of being in relationship when I think about the generosity of time and presence that it took to give Job those days and nights of silence. 🌿

Anna Grunner is executive assistant to the bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod and a Ph.D. Candidate in Hebrew Bible and Its Interpretation at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. She loves cooking and yoga and is probably a little too devoted to her dog.

The 'Fifth Evangelist' and Friends

Lutherans "...have all this great, old music that they have sung and played for centuries; and a lot of them don't even know about it."

by Scott C. Weidler

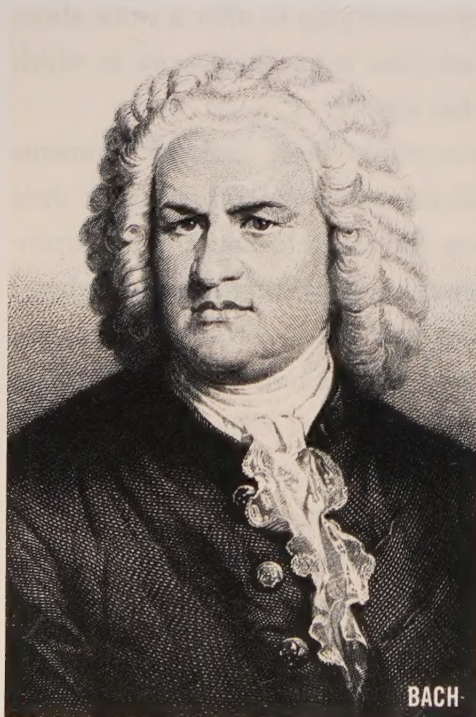
I overheard this in a conversation between a colleague on the communications staff (we'll call him Joe) and a young intern. It happened 18 years ago, so I have paraphrased the comment. It was early in my time serving the ELCA as associate director for worship and music when I had the privilege of representing the worship staff at an introductory event for our church's Spanish language worship book, *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* in Puerto Rico.

The conversation was fascinating as Joe tried to explain to his intern what being Lutheran meant. Neither Joe nor the intern were Lutheran, although Joe

had worked for the ELCA for a number of years. The intern was just a few days into his job. Both of them came from fundamentalist, free church traditions.

Sadly, I had to agree with the comment. Lots of Lutherans, even life-long ones, are unaware of these incredible musical treasures that are a part of our tradition. Sometimes the riches we have in our own family are the hardest to acknowledge or appreciate.

On the calendars in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) and *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), July 28 is designated to commemorate three great Lutheran



musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frederick Handel and Heinrich Schütz.

Many of us know about J. S. Bach. If you can't whistle one of his tunes, you probably have heard his name. And if you did hear one of his more familiar tunes, you would say, "Ah, yes, of course, Bach." G. F. Handel is most well-known for one of his monumental works, the oratorio, *Messiah*. Most will recognize at least the opening of his "Hallelujah Chorus." But, Heinrich Schütz? I hope some have heard of him and even know his music, but I know most have not.

Johann Sebastian Bach

Johann Sebastian Bach was born into a distinguished family of musicians in Eisenach, Germany, in 1685. At an early age, he learned to play the violin and organ and served as a choirboy. His reputation as a performer and composer was already well known by the time he was 8. He served as organist in Arnstadt and Mühlhausen, where he married his cousin, Maria Barbara Bach.

In 1708, Bach became court organist and chamber musician to the Duke of Weimar. He was later promoted to concertmaster. In 1717, he went to Cöthen as *Kapellmeister* (director of music). It was there that his wife died in 1720. The next year he married Anna Magdalena Wülcken.

In 1723, Bach moved to Leipzig where he served until his death in 1750. In Leipzig, he was cantor (leader of the people's song) at the famous St. Thomas School, both St. Thomas and St. Nicholas churches, and the *Pauliner-Kirche* at the University of Leipzig.

The father of 20 children, four of whom were also outstanding composers, Bach was buried without ceremony in a churchyard. His remains were moved 200 years later to within St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

George Frederick Handel

George Frederick Handel was born in Halle, Germany, also in 1685. His father was a surgeon; and his mother,

the daughter of a pastor. Originally educated in law, he became organist at the Reformed cathedral in Halle for a brief time. He then went to Hamburg and on to Italy to work in opera. Eventually, he went to England and, in 1726, became a British subject.

As the popularity of opera waned, Handel turned to oratorio, a large work developed on a religious theme for soloists and chorus. The most familiar of these is *Messiah*, first performed in Dublin in 1741. His strong sense of charity and concern for others made him very popular in England. He died in 1759 and, after a funeral with 3,000 in attendance, was buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey in London.

Heinrich Schütz

Heinrich Schütz, the greatest German composer before Bach, was born to a family of innkeepers in Köstritz, Saxony, in 1585, 100 years before Bach or Handel. Like Bach, he too was a choirboy, receiving a fine education. Like Handel, he too entered university to study law. But only one year later, he was sent to Venice to study music with Giovanni Gabrielli, who provided a significant influence on the young Schütz. After Gabrielli's death, he returned to Germany to resume his study of law.

However, music called Schütz again and he entered the service of the Elector of Saxony at Dresden. It was here that Schütz began exploring the influence of the Italian style on German church music. He returned to Venice to study with the renowned Monteverdi.

After a time back in Dresden and the death of his wife, Schütz left the court, which was afflicted with the plague and suffering caused by the Thirty Years' War. He never married again, but he spent time in Copenhagen, Brunswick, and Lüneberg before returning to the Dresden court in 1645 where he remained in service until his death in 1672.

Although he was greatly influenced by his Italian teachers, his greatest achievement was crafting musical works that remained truly German. His choral settings

of the psalms, as paraphrased by Cornelius Becker, remain among his greatest works.

'The fifth evangelist'

Bach is considered one of the greatest figures in all of Western music and is such a prominent and important figure within Lutheranism that Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom called him "the fifth evangelist." Although it is highly unlikely that these three gentlemen ever met (especially since Schütz was 100 years older than the other two), I still consider them to be friends. Even though they worked in different times and very different settings, the core values that shaped their approach to music-making were similar: grounded in faith, and always to the glory of an ever-creating God, working through their imaginations and compositional skill.

The musical achievements of Bach, Schütz and Handel are magnificent. We as Lutherans should be proud of these three ancestors of ours. We should still hear their music sung and played in the worship life of our congregations today. But is the point of this commemoration on the church's calendar only to recreate some magical historic past?

All God's songs

I think back to that morning in Puerto Rico where I overheard that non-Lutheran colleague say, "... they have all this great, old music that they have sung and played for centuries, and a lot of them don't even know about them." I was proud and wanted to treasure and even protect this tradition that had nurtured me so profoundly.

But I left that conversation and went to where, for the entire day, I was surrounded by other Lutherans singing *their* songs, mostly in Spanish, and mostly unfamiliar to me. It was as if I were being handed a part of my own tradition that I didn't even know about. That day I became committed to learn and value songs from

all different cultures and times and places that make up this church. I also began to be concerned about how we could share one another's songs with integrity.

Please allow me one more story. In 1999, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly was in Denver, Colo. I had planned and coordinated all the music for the daily worship services in the convention center. At one service a large choir would be singing. One of the choir pieces was from the Black Gospel tradition, so I had invited the choir director from a prominent Denver historically Black church to be our guest conductor that day. As this beautiful, gentle, but commanding African American woman stood in front of 250 mostly German and Scandinavian singers, she stopped and boldly asked, "Why are *you* singing *my* song?" After a very nervous pause, during which time I was absolutely convinced I had caused a serious racial *faux pas*, she said sweetly, "Because all God's people sing all God's songs."

No, the point of this commemoration is not only that we restore the music of Bach, Schütz, and Handel to our worship services if it isn't there now, but rather to rejoice in the vast diversity of musical gifts that are present in this church we call Lutheran.

God of glory, whose praise by saints and angels in heaven is unceasing, you have given to your servants Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schütz, and George Frederick Handel abundant and manifold gifts to proclaim your glory: Be ever present with your servants who seek through music to perfect the praises offered by your people on earth; and grant that they may even now hear the sound of your beauty and at the last rejoice in the perfection of praise in your eternal kingdom; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Prayer of the Day for this commemoration from *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations* by Philip H. Pfatteicher, Augsburg Fortress, 2008.) 🌸

Scott Weidler serves as ELCA program director for worship and music.



LET US PRAY

Listening as Prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

“Hear ‘dat?” he says with wonder in his voice. “Hear ‘dat?” My little grandson, no matter how busy or wound up, always stops in his tracks at the sound of the train whistling by our little village in Glacier Park.

Elliot’s ability to hear the whistling train makes us stop to listen as well. He’s enthralled by trains and the magic of winding through the mountains, in and out of tunnels, rumbling and roaring into the distance. Elliot’s ability to imagine where the train has come from and where it might be going comes from listening.

Be still, listen, and know that I am God. From life in the womb punctuated by the steady beating of our mother’s heart and the swoosh of amniotic fluid around us all the way to the very end of our days when hearing often is among the last of our faculties, we are surrounded by sound. Sometimes it’s deafening, and we want to block it out. Sometimes it’s subtle, elusive. Much of the time, we listen without being aware of listening.

Be still, listen, and know that I am God. Scientists remind us that the universe is an amazing symphony of sound pulsating with music and rhythm. For me nothing is quite so compelling as the music of waves against the beach, the shrill cry of seagulls, the steady patter of rain. God’s presence is tangible in those experiences.

But a good share of the time, listening seems to elude us. Perhaps it’s age: There’s so much we want to say about life, and time is running out. Or as someone is talking to us, we allow our minds to wander or race to what *we*

might say next. Too often, we ignore the sounds around us. Listening is an art that requires cultivation.

Be still, listen, and know that I am God. Hearing one another is a gift. Making space to listen, giving another an opportunity to speak while providing ears to receive is affirmation and validation. It’s a way of listening another’s soul into being, a way of prayer.

“Listen to your life,” Frederick Buechner reminds us. “See your life for the fathomless mystery it is.” Rather than endless talking to God, we might do well to quiet ourselves and consider listening to God in all the sounds within and around us. Surely listening to God’s beating heart within our own beating hearts is a form of prayer.

When our grandchildren come to visit, I often tuck them in at night in their beds under the low eave of their upstairs bedroom. I remind them to listen: “Shhh, do you hear the rain splashing on the roof above your head? Listen! Can you hear the river rushing by outside the window? God gives us rain to make things grow. The river is God’s gift, a place to swim, to fish, to play. Shhh.”

Be still, listen, and know that I am God.



Julie K. Ageson retired from ELCA Resource Center leadership and now she and her spouse write and travel. She is co-author of *One Hope: Re-membering the Body of Christ* (Liturgical Press/Augsburg Fortress) which honors the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The essays in *One Hope* are the collaborative work of three Lutheran and three Catholic scholars and pastoral leaders.

by Katie Scarvey

Prayers Made Tangible



SHAWLS DONATED BY **WOMEN OF THE ELCA** BRING WARMTH AND COMFORT TO MANY.

Women of the ELCA shawls provide hope to women served by Lutheran Services Carolinas' Faith Farm, a Dallas, N.C., ministry with transitional housing for homeless female military veterans (above), and LSC nursing home residents (right).



10,508 prayer shawls. If you estimate that it takes 20 hours of work to knit or crochet one prayer shawl—and for many knitters, that estimate is conservative—making 1,508 shawls would require 30,160 hours of labor. Translated into eight-hour workdays, that's 3,770 days—or more than 10 years of work, with no weekends or days off.

That helps put into perspective the amount of energy that went into creating the woolly avalanche of shawls that poured into the Ninth Triennial Gathering of the Women of the ELCA last summer in Charlotte as women from around the country answered the call for prayer shawls. The shawls were distributed among the various ministries of Lutheran Services of Carolinas (LSC).

A shawl knitted by a woman in Minnesota may now be the soft “woobie” that soothes to sleep a child in foster care in South Carolina. A shawl crocheted in California could now grace the shoulders of a frail nursing home resident in North Carolina who can never be too warm.

The shawls, of course, are more than the sum of their stitches. Prayers and hope went into the making of the shawls and accompanied them as they made their way to recipients. Made by human hands and prayed over by human hearts, prayer shawls affirm the value of the life of the recipient and serve as a reminder of God's comforting and unconditional love.

As Janet Bristow, author of several books about prayer shawls, has written, prayer shawls “wrap, enfold, comfort, cover, give solace, mother, hug, shelter and beautify.”

For warmth

Adults with severe and persistent mental illness in LSC's Assertive Community Treatment Team program (ACTT) in Raleigh, N.C., were thrilled to receive the shawls.

“Many of our clients don't have funds to purchase winter wear,” said Brie Teer, who works in the ACTT office. “They use the shawls to keep warm.”

For welcome

LSC's Refugee Resettlement program also made good use of the shawls, distributing them to newly arrived refugee families as a welcoming gift.

“They're all very grateful and excited,” said program director Bedrija Jazic, who adds that the shawls are sometimes used as blankets for young children.

Hundreds of the shawls went to LSC's nursing homes in North Carolina, including Trinity Place in



Women of the ELCA shawls remind recipients of God's unconditional love.



Shawls are delivered to various Lutheran Services Carolinas ministries.

Albemarle. Residents there, including 103-year-old Jennie Whitley, were excited to receive an unexpected blessing, a gift made by unknown hands.

"I've really enjoyed it," Whitley said. "It keeps me warm."

"Residents were very touched that someone spent so much time preparing a gift for them," said Administrator Courtney Adams.

For comfort and peace

At Trinity Village in Hickory, N.C., the shawls are used as prayer quilts when a resident is nearing the end of life, with a ceremony for those families who desire it, said Sharon Benfield, life enrichment director at Trinity Village. Staff members gather at the bedside of the resident, along with his or her family.

"We place the quilt over the loved one, covering them with love and prayers," Benfield said. "We often read Scripture and pray together, giving thanks and celebrating the life we have shared together."

"Many family members are incredibly moved and so appreciate the act of kindness, the tangible gift and the dignity associated with it all, to the very end."

The variety of colors and styles of the shawls allows for personalizing shawl selections, Benfield said. "Many times when we come in with a prayer quilt (shawl), families say, 'That looks like Mom' or 'That was

Dad's favorite color.'"

In addition to the ceremonial function, the shawls also are shared with Trinity Village residents who want to keep warm.

For birthday cheer

At Trinity Glen, a skilled-care nursing home in Winston-Salem, residents look forward to getting a prayer shawl on their birthdays.

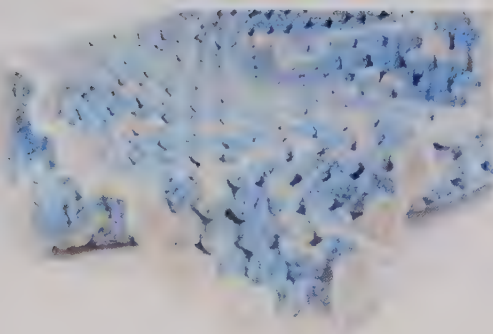
Cleo Douthet, 102, recently received one with jaunty stripes in bold colors. "Thank you kindly," he exclaimed.

Resident Anne Vandiver loves hers, which features three soothing shades of grayish blue. "It's the best gift I've gotten," she said. She uses it sparingly—for special occasions such as church—because she wants to "keep it nice."

Anne learned that her shawl came from Sharon Salo of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Cloud, Minn.; and she added her own line of thanks to a note written by the keeper of the shawls, Chaplain Beth Woodard.

"I was very excited to get it," Anne said. "It was a very, very nice blessing. I was very touched by those women who spend their time doing good things for others." 🌿

Formerly a newspaper features editor, **Katie Scarvey** is a communications specialist for Lutheran Services Carolinas and lives in Salisbury, N.C.



A Prayer in Every Loop

by Beth Woodard

When you're in your eighth or ninth decade, a birthday isn't a celebration you necessarily want to think about.

But at Trinity Glen, a skilled-care nursing home in Winston-Salem, N.C., a new program ensures that when a resident's special day rolls around, it gets noticed. Each resident receives a hand-knitted or hand-crocheted prayer shawl on his or her birthday.

My chaplain's office at Trinity Glen is brimming with shawls—crocheted shawls with squares in the shape of colorful crosses; green lacy knitted shawls, light as a cobweb; shawls with hot pink tassels; sturdy shawls in shades of brown.

They come from Grand Rapids, Mich., and Sebastian, Fla.; from Washington state and Vermont.

These prayer shawls often move residents to tears of joy. To be told "Happy birthday" and receive a squeeze of the hand and a kiss on the cheek, to know that you matter and that you are loved, means a great deal.

Church members who make the shawls pray for the recipient, whoever he or she might be. And when the shawls leave the church and go out into the wider world, often the one who made the shawl doesn't know the one who will receive it. That kind of intercessory prayer—praying for strangers—can strengthen the religious foundations of all who are involved.

Initially, Trinity Glen received 74 shawls from the bounty provided by the Women of the ELCA, and then a further allotment of another three dozen—a gracious plenty of beautiful creations. As residents come and go, though, we wanted to ensure a steady supply for future residents as well.

I sent a simple email request to members of a Facebook page for ELCA clergy, asking: If you are pastor at a church that has a prayer shawl ministry, would you be will-

ing to mail me one shawl?

Within 48 hours, we had promises of dozens of shawls. They came from Baudette, Minn.; from Lilburn, Ga.; from High Point, N.C., and from Phoenix, Ariz. "Thanks for today's God sighting," one colleague responded.

I'm a knitter myself. I know how much love, dedication, and time goes into every stitch. The thought of a prayer in every loop of yarn takes my breath away as I contemplate the thousands of prayers sheltered in each shawl.

"Thank you," one resident wrote in a shaky scrawl, wanting to add her personal gratitude to our note of thanks sent to the congregation in St. Cloud, Minn., where her prayer shawl was made.

Even residents deep within dementia respond to these shawls—to the knowledge of a stranger's prayers—with a sparkle in their eyes, with surprise that someone thought of them and wished them well, with simple gratitude. For just a moment, who they used to be flashes within them. They remember, and so do I. 🌿

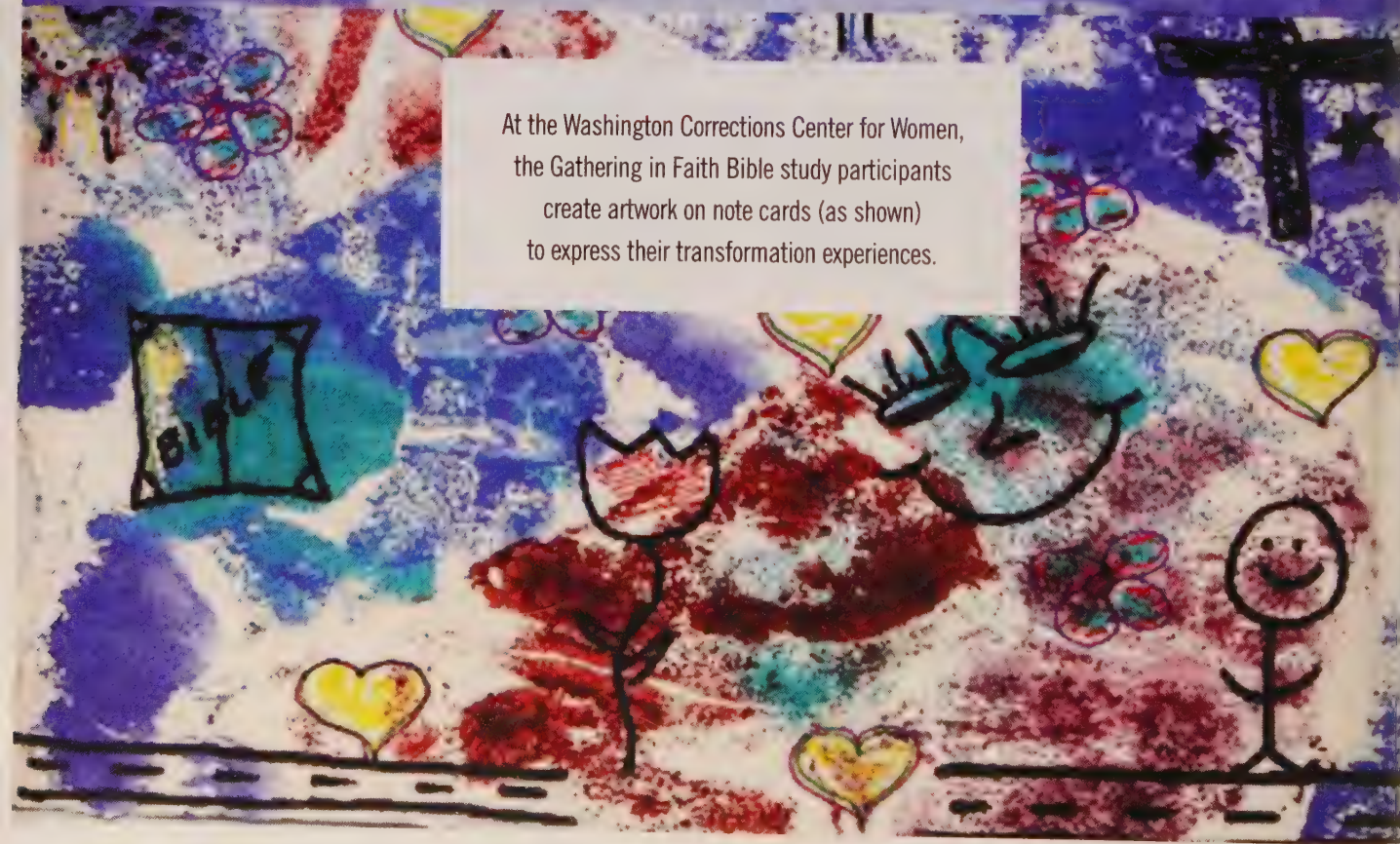
The Rev. Beth Woodard is chaplain at Trinity Glen. A 2008 graduate of Wake Forest University Divinity School, she lives with her family in Greensboro, N.C., where they are members of Christ Lutheran Church.

MANY WAYS TO SHARE THE

Gather BIBLE STUDY

by Carol Schersten LaHurd

At the Washington Corrections Center for Women, the Gathering in Faith Bible study participants create artwork on note cards (as shown) to express their transformation experiences.



For decades Lutheran women (and men) have been learning the Bible's stories through the studies published in *Lutheran Woman Today* and now *Gather*. Stories from history and contemporary life supplement narratives from Genesis or Ruth or Matthew. All are explored and tied together in a monthly study, sometimes accompanied by a leader guide.

Living the story by telling the story

My experience as author of *Transforming Life and Faith* made clear that using *Gather* to tell the Bible's stories can be life changing. When we study the way the Exodus narrative moves back and forth between the faith and doubt displayed by Moses and the Israelites or savor Luke's colorful retelling of the earliest Christian mission in Acts, we can cherish fully the power of God's word. We can be transformed when we share that word with others and, together, apply it to our daily lives to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

Varying leadership

As I led Bible workshops around the ELCA this past year, I learned that the most common approach is Bible study meetings led by circle members in rotation. But there are people who routinely lead the Bible study beyond their own congregations. In Newton, Iowa, Pastor Ken Ahnholz serves a two-point parish and conducts a study for the two congregations together, alternating church buildings. In North Dakota, Sharon St. Aubin has led the Bible study in her congregation; she agreed to take on a second church that was planning to do something that seemed easier than *Gather's* monthly study. To engage them, St. Aubin prepared a choral reading of the Exodus story with parts for God, Moses, and a narrator—an activity that she said "made the story come alive" and made clearer Moses' lack of confidence as God called him into service. Happily, this

new group has now decided to buy two more *Gather* subscriptions.

In Iowa, Pastor Del Olivier guides his congregation's two circles through each monthly study and uses *Gather* at a local assisted living facility. He improvises to serve this more diverse group and closes with Holy Communion. Olivier attends the annual Bible study training at Wartburg Seminary.

At Mt. Zion Lutheran Church in Conover, N.C., Pastors Scott Bollinger and Bob Shoffner take turns training the Bible study leaders prior to their monthly meetings. Members of the three circles rotate leadership of the discussion. At the combined Advent/Christmas lunch gathering last December, Shoffner led a brief version of the Bible lesson "Faith in the Family" and mentioned the related article "Learning with the Luthers." Two sisters thanked him, saying they believe they're 13th generation relatives of Martin Luther. Shoffner connected them with 14th generation grandson Christian Priesmeier in Germany, who has done extensive genealogical work on Luther's family. He concludes, "So...one never knows what might come out of one of the studies!"

Meeting early and weekly

At first the women of Rebecca Circle were hesitant to be featured in this article. They agreed, not because they want recognition but because "our creativity in finding a meeting time (6:30 a.m.) and our commitment to Francis House and to each other might inspire other groups." Years ago a handful of women from Zumbro Lutheran Church in Rochester, Minn., began meeting every second Tuesday for breakfast and Bible study. Now as many as 15 to 20 people show up at 6:30 a.m.—even in sub-zero temps.

The format allows them to eat breakfast, share prayer concerns, conduct business, and have 45 minutes to discuss the lesson. The women say they appreciate both the background in the leader guide and the

magazine's excellent, well-focused articles. Some read each issue when it first arrives and again before their monthly meeting. A member said: "Rebecca Circle to me is most special due to the people in the group who intentionally pray for each other and our loved ones. The power of prayer is felt. And the confidentiality which promotes trust within the group touches my soul. The lessons and discussions are positive in that they provide a framework for sharing."

Over many years together, the Rebecca Circle has launched successful service projects, including Francis House, with rooms for 17 formerly homeless women and men. They supply necessities—a huge help for residents who live on less than \$200 per month.

The women of Rebecca Circle also care for each other. One member said, "We accept each other and our strengths and weaknesses. I am always inviting women to join us because I know they will find a safe, welcoming, and affirming place to belong."

Meeting at 6:30 is ambitious—but so is meeting every week. That's what happens at Bethany Lutheran Church in Longview, Wash., a small, family-oriented congregation. For the third year, eight to 12 women meet once a week from 10:30 a.m. until noon. They spend two to three weeks on the Bible study and then survey the articles to continue discussing the Bible study themes. Most of the group attends the annual August Bible study author workshop that the Southwestern Washington Synodical Women's Organization has sponsored since 1989.

Member Kathy Newton, the most frequent leader, has done group Bible study all her adult life. The weekly format means they don't have to rush their conversa-

tions and can truly apply the Bible to their daily lives," she said. Because the members come from diverse backgrounds, not always Lutheran, their dialogue is lively and their interaction insightful. Especially important, says member Barb Clausen, "is the weekly prayer support, the changing application of the lesson to our daily lives during the month, as well as the fellowship lunch afterwards." Judy Bailey adds, "Sharing joys as well as trials of today is very therapeutic."

Taking the study to women in prison

Dealing with life's problems can be intensely challenging for people in prison, such as the 10 women in the Gathering in Faith Bible study at Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor (Purdy).

Bible study leader Sharon Peterson has a background in Stephen Ministry, hospice training, and lay ministry certification. Most important, she says, "God has always guided my life through prayer. At the age of 70, I pray moment to moment with a happy and thankful heart! God has given me so many lessons in my listening to others with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit."

In 2009, God's guidance led Joanne Nelson to help create the nonprofit Empowering Life at Peninsula Lutheran Church, Gig Harbor, to support Peterson's work. Today with support from Lutheran churches and fundraising events, Empowering Life sponsors numerous programs at the two correctional centers for women in the state of Washington. These include life-coaching, pastoral care, mentoring, re-entry help, life change/grief counseling, parenting skills, art workshops and the "Gathering in Faith and Action" Bible study.

At the heart and soul of the programs are Peter



son's Spirit-led dedication, her understanding of how personalities work, and her ability to be frank and firm with the people she counsels. They know her presence enables them to discover how to better their lives. "They smile as they see what works for them," she said, "and that's an affirmation from God." She tells them, "I won't let you choose something that's not real, that won't work for you."

The current women's Bible study members, ranging from 39 to 67 years of age, are a mix of U.S.-born ethnicities. Most have a Christian background, and three have worshiped in Lutheran congregations in the Southwestern Washington Synod. Most have children and some have grandchildren. Each woman has come to Bible study to share and build relationships of trust.

"What is most important in my working with incarcerated women, men, and their families is that they know we are all God's children and each one of us has value and purpose," Peterson says. "[They] hear God's love and grace affirming their importance and fruitful nature, and [learn] how to forgive and heal."

The women's own words describe how the Bible study has helped them:

"[It] has taught me to share my relationship with God, and others when needed."

"My transformation has been facing my fear."

"God has taught me how not to judge others just because I don't agree with their ways of living."

"I visualize how God deserves all of me and never stops loving me."

"Transformation takes time. God's words and gentle love pour out to me abundantly each day."

"My relationship with God has steadily grown."

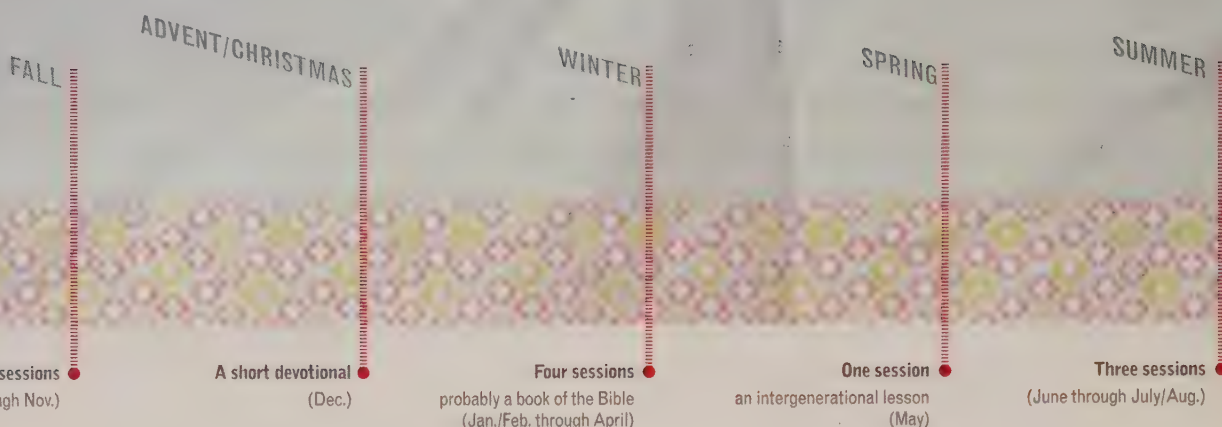
It is not only women in prison who need to be transformed by Empowering Life programs. Peterson is extremely aware that "one of the greatest challenges

for congregational members is understanding that guilt and shame are imposed by humans, not God. Until individuals come to reside behind 'razor wire,' they don't understand how their poor choices have come from fear and lack of trust, and from not believing others will listen to their burden with open hearts and minds, reflecting God's love and grace rather than judgment." Church members who participate in Empowering Life bring this transformed awareness and empathy back to their congregations.

Reaching new readers

Thousands of readers look forward to each new Bible study. But how can more people be introduced to the value of studying Scripture through *Gather*? In the Grand Canyon Synod, some congregations give free subscriptions to all new women members. Desert Hills Lutheran Church sends each recipient a postcard announcing, "A gift for you will soon arrive in your mailbox ~ for the next 10 months." Women around the country give *Gather* subscriptions to non-Lutheran friends. A brain-storming session at the September 2014 Bible study workshop in Phoenix yielded these ideas: give copies of *Gather* to retirement homes or hospitals, hand deliver to home-bound members, and even leave one in an airplane seat pocket. One Iowa congregation hands out cards listing the year's Bible study theme and monthly sessions on one side and details about each circle meeting on the other. The *Gather* editors innovate too—expanding readership by offering a digital version for use on computers, e-readers, and smart phones. Learn more at gathermagazine.org. 🌿

Carol Schersten LaHurd is a lifelong teacher. She has taught biblical studies, Islam, and interfaith relations in colleges, seminaries, the church, and the wider community. She holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She is author of "Transforming Life and Faith," *Gather's* 2014–15 study, and "Luke's Vision: The People of God," the 1998 study for *Lutheran Woman Today* (now *Gather*).



Gather to Grow Your Faith

by Eva James Yeo

Beginning with the September issue, *Gather* magazine will offer the Bible study in a new and different way to allow for more Bible studies with a variety of new authors.

Gather's Bible study will offer Bible studies (fall, winter, spring, summer and a devotional), and the leader guide will be included in the magazine. We hope you will find this as exciting as we do.

We are thrilled for the women who will have a chance to share in the joy of meeting together with a community that gathers and grows in faith as they study the Bible. Each issue of *Gather* will continue to have a mix of the faith and life articles that illuminate the Bible study, as well as columns such as Give Us This Day, Let Us Pray, Grace Notes, Earth Wise and Amen! Since we began promoting this new format, women have commented: "We love this new format," "It will work well with our women's group," and "This will better fit our group's schedule."

This new Bible study format is also a way to reach out to a new generation of women who want to grow in their faith. Consider that the shorter sessions are ideal for women who may not have the time to invest in a longer study.

For 25-plus years, women in more than 7,000 congregational units have met monthly for the Bible study sessions in *Lutheran Woman Today* and now *Gather*. Are you one of these faithful women? We know that women who are a part of Women of the ELCA are supported by each other in their faith journeys. Women pray together, develop lifelong friendships, and have opportunities to serve and make a difference in the community and around the world.

Why not take this opportunity to share the joy and support you have received as a community of women? We can talk about the Women of the ELCA with thousands of women in local ELCA congregations and in our communities who are not familiar with resources

programs, scholarships, and grants that Women of the ELCA offers today.

Women often tell us that the Bible study is a treasured feature of *Gather* and a way to share their faith with friends and family. So many women say they love the fellowship, inspiration, learning, and growing together as they study and discuss various biblical topics.

Women also look forward to Bible study events. The authors can be tapped by seminaries, synodical organizations, and congregations to share information about the study and answer questions you may have. It is always exciting to get to know the author. You can find them online by visiting www.gathermagazine.org and clicking on "Bible studies" in the left column. You are welcome to sponsor your own event and invite one of the authors (or all of them) to speak in your synod for church.

Have you joined the challenge drive to drum up more subscriptions? You can invite women to subscribe to the magazine. It is faithful women like you who have benefited from the Bible study and the encouragement from your sisters in Christ. You, too, can become an ambassador for the organization and mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

Suki Kisling, vice president of the Grand Canyon Synod and a member of Desert Hills Lutheran Church, Green Valley, Ariz., said that one way her unit garnered more than 50 new subscribers to *Gather* was to offer subscriptions as gifts.

They then followed up with the women who received the gift subscriptions and asked them to join the Bible study group. You can reach women who are not a part of a faith com-

munity with a simple invitation and welcome.

Consider women who are new members of your congregation, co-workers, busy moms, or career women to encourage them on their faith journey. Print subscribers have free access to the digital *Gather*, which can be accessed on computers, iPads, smart phones, and Android devices.

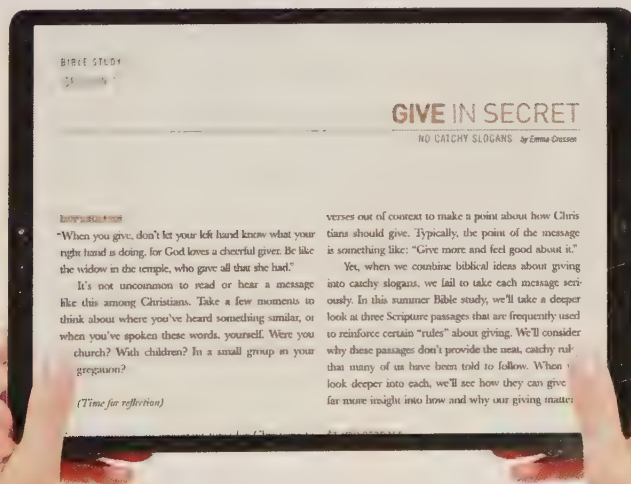
As you plan your programs this season, consider a gift subscription for women to participate in the next Bible study. This can be a life-changing event for the next generation of women.

However you decide to invite women into your faith community, it will require you to reach out to women who are not included in your unit. Think about hospitality, flexibility, and creativity. There are women of all ages who are looking for a place to grow in faith with a community of women. And Women of the ELCA is the place for women to be supported in community and to live out their faith.

As the official magazine of Women of the ELCA, *Gather* will continue to guide women as they live and experience faith every day. It also connects Christian women of all ages with like-minded peers who are committed to grow in faith and to build the kingdom of God next door and across the globe.

If you do not meet regularly in a Bible study group and would like to form or find an established group in a congregation near you, contact Eva James Yeo, director for membership, at eva.yeo@elca.org. To order your subscription to *Gather* magazine, call 800-328-4648 or visit www.womenoftheelca.org. 🌸

Eva James Yeo is director for membership for Women of the ELCA.





EARTH WISE

The Generous Gardener

by Terry L. Bowes

Good grief, it's hot!

I roll my eyes when I hear people say glibly that at least in Colorado it's a dry heat. No kidding. My skin is dry. My hair is dry. I go through pounds of lip balm. I find some small comfort in reminding myself that six months from now I'll be trudging through snow.

In spite of the heat, or maybe because of it, I spend more time in the garden now than ever. The soil soaks up the irrigation water and still looks parched. Weeds still need to be pulled. At the same time, the garden has gifts to give me.

It is a veritable rainbow of primary colors: yellow crookneck squash, red tomatoes, purple eggplant, green peppers. Nothing is more beautiful than a vegetable garden at dawn. I try to harvest vegetables early in the morning to retain their nighttime coolness and moisture. There are beans, cucumbers, zucchini and okra to be picked.

I pluck the first ripe tomato of the season, cupping it in my hands and inhaling its tangy perfume. Soon we will be harvesting pounds of tomatoes at a time.

The extravagance of the garden gives me the opportunity to be generous myself. I pass out tomatoes at my doctor's and dentist's offices. I share fistfuls of basil, which sure beats Febreeze as an air freshener.

Gardening can become a community calling. World War I gave rise to the Victory Garden. People around the country were encouraged to plant "War Gardens," also known as "Food Gardens for Defense," to aid the war effort. Planting

beans became a patriotic act.

Victory Gardens experienced a resurgence during World War II to compensate for food shortages and to help feed the military. Farmers, schools, seed companies, and the government worked together to help people learn how to grow and preserve food. Colorful posters and newspaper articles encouraged everyone to participate.

"Plant a Food Garden," one poster urged, "Our Food is Fighting." As a result, millions of Victory Gardens grew up all across the country: in backyards, pots and window boxes. The purpose was for people to grow enough food to feed their family and neighbors and preserve the remainder to feed everyone until the next harvest season. I especially love the poster of a woman with an armload of jarred tomatoes and other vegetables. The caption reads "Yes, I Can!"

Victory Gardens waned during the affluent post-war years when supermarkets grew up where the gardens once thrived. In the 21st century, home gardens have a renewed commitment to victory. Now, the definition of victory has evolved from a military cry to hearing the cry of the underfed and undernourished. Today's Victory Gardener is committed to civic innovation and social progress to grow better food, better gardens and better health for everyone. The poster "Grow Vitamins at Your Kitchen Door" is as relevant today as it was in 1943.

Gardens spread joy

Community gardens are springing up

everywhere. They vary widely in size and scope, but each of them gives people the opportunity to grow a tomato—people who couldn't have done it otherwise. The hopeless and powerless man or woman can be as creative and as productive as a corporate executive. Soil is the great equalizer. Sunshine and fresh air are the great healers. What a fun surprise it was for me to spot a small community garden in the middle of the parking lot of a newly built hospital.

Research has shown that even looking out a window at greenery makes people happier, even those in grim circumstances. Hospital patients who have the opportunity to work in a garden seem to forget their pain and their pain medications.

Community gardens live up to their name. Wherever they are, they create community and friendship. Smiles and conversations grow more quickly than zucchini. Gardeners are generous with their experience and knowledge. My best piece of advice for a beginner gardener is that they should not yield to the temptation to set out their tomato plants too early in the spring. I don't set my tomatoes out until the ground is consistently warmer than 50 degrees.

There are regional and cultural traditions around giving and receiving plants as gifts. In her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Barbara

Kingsolver recounts giving tomato plants as Mother's Day gifts after moving to Virginia. She quickly learned that no one in that area ever said "Thank you" or "You're welcome" for a plant. Ignoring that admonition would jinx the plant, and it would wither and die.

In 2009, *Yes!* magazine included an article of "Graces Around the World." As a grower, I was especially touched by a grace from Ghana:

*Earth, when I am about to die
I lean upon you.
Earth, while I am alive
I depend upon you.*

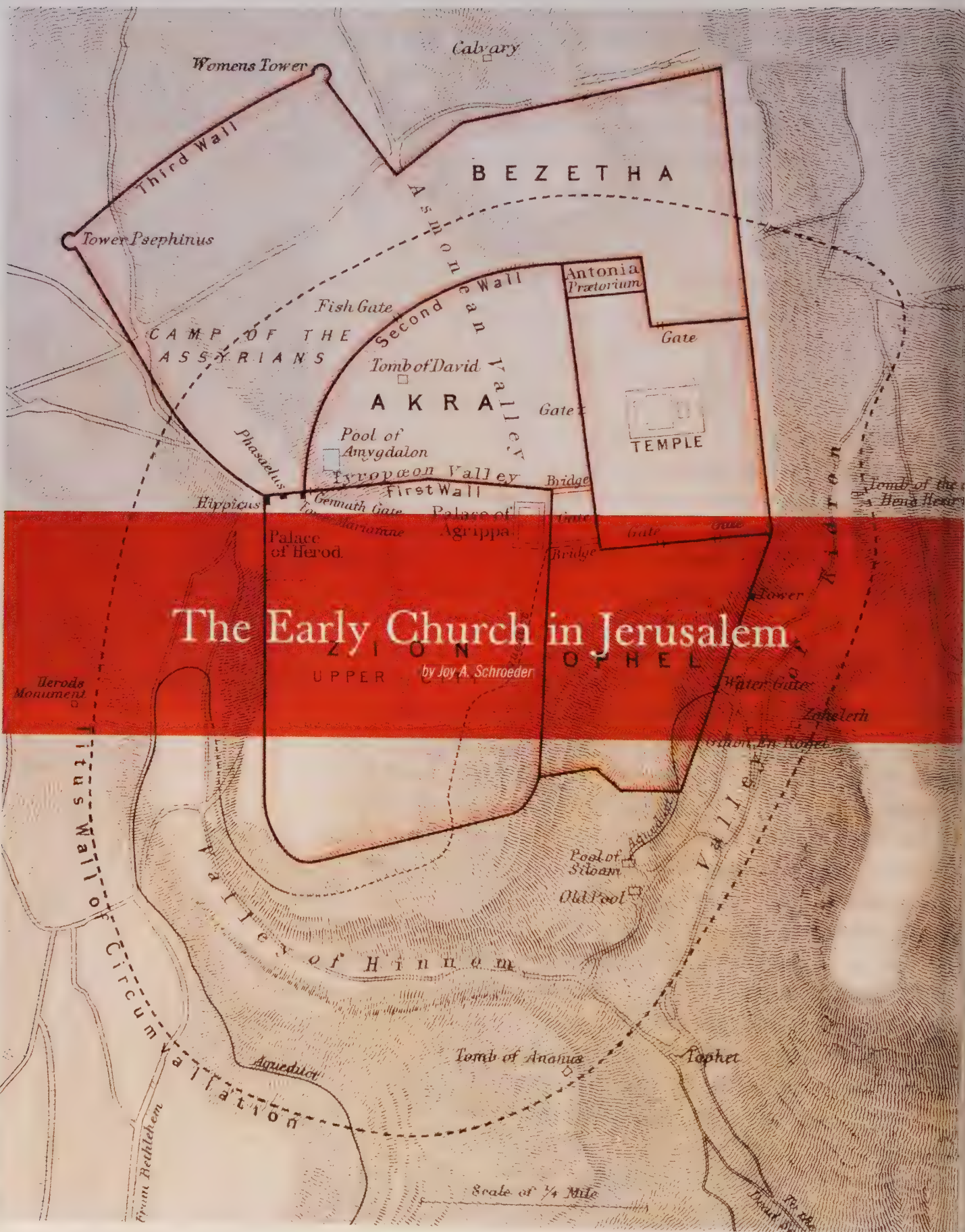
As a Christian, I am touched by this prayer from Mother Teresa:

*Make us worthy, Lord,
To serve those people
Throughout the world who live
and die
In poverty and hunger.
Give them, through our hands,
This day their daily bread,
And by our understanding love,
Give peace and joy.*

It is still hot and dry, but working in the garden makes me happy—especially when I give in to the temptation to run laughing through the sprinkler like a child. 🌿

Terry L. Bowes gardens, grandmothers, and gathers near Longmont, Colo.





The Early Church in Jerusalem

by Jay A. Schroeder

The book of Acts describes the church's origins in Jerusalem. After his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Approximately 120 believers waited in the city for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:12–2:4). As the message of Jesus spread throughout the Roman Empire, many first-generation Christians in other cities maintained contact with the Jerusalem church through messengers, visits, and even a substantial monetary collection organized by the apostle Paul. Early believers in those other communities reflected on their relationships with the Jerusalem believers and their responsibility to the "birthplace" of the church.

Witnesses in Jerusalem

Christianity emerged as a sect within Judaism. The earliest followers observed Jewish dietary restrictions and rituals such as circumcision. These Jews considered their worship of Jesus to be in continuity with the faith their ancestors had practiced. Some were women and men who followed Jesus south from Galilee to Jerusalem (Mark 15:40–41). Others had already been residents of Jerusalem and its surroundings.

The words *Christian* and *Christianity* were not initially used to describe Jesus' followers (Acts 11:26). We might best refer to them as "Christ-believers" and call the movement "emergent Christianity." Some early Christ-believers referred to themselves as followers of "the Way" (Acts 9:2). Paul used the term *saints* to address his brothers and sisters in Christ (Romans 1:7).

The Jerusalem church included people of different social classes, cultures, and languages. While some wealthier believers owned homes and fields (Acts 4:34), most were far less affluent. Some scholars estimate that more than three-quarters of all residents of Jerusalem were living at or below subsistence level. These included day laborers, beggars, and impoverished widows. Many church members of the earliest church probably

came from this substantial segment of the population.

Early leaders of the Jerusalem church included John and Peter (also called "Cephas," Aramaic for *rock*). Jesus' brother James eventually emerged as an authoritative leader in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). Paul said that James, Peter, and John were "acknowledged pillars" among the apostles (Galatians 2:9). The author of Acts suggests that the apostles and missionaries to other churches needed to "report back" to the Jerusalem leadership (Acts 11:1–18; 12:25; 15:1–35). Though Mary Magdalene, the first witness of Jesus' resurrection, is not specifically mentioned in Acts, she presumably was among the women believers gathered in Jerusalem following Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:14). Several post-biblical documents suggest that early believers remembered her as an authoritative teacher and leader.

The Christ-believers experienced sporadic opposition from some Jewish leaders. Before his conversion, Paul had thrown men and women into prison and consented to the stoning of the deacon Stephen (Acts 8:1–3). Others, such as the Pharisee Gamaliel, advised that the Christ-believers be left alone (Acts 5:33–42). The first-century Jewish historian Josephus reports that when the high priest Ananus II arranged for Jesus' brother James to be stoned to death in 62 A.D., Jews in the city protested his actions as illegal and Ananus was deposed.

Breaking bread and praising God

The book of Acts describes two places for Christian gatherings in Jerusalem: the Temple and the believers' homes. The Temple, the preeminent site for Jewish worship until its destruction by the Romans in 70 A.D., had a large covered porch called Solomon's Portico where worshippers could be sheltered from sun and rain (Acts 3:11). Given the typical bustle and commotion at the Temple, church members gathering for prayer and teaching might not have seemed substantially different from other Jews worshipping there.

The Christ-believers in Jerusalem met regularly—

perhaps daily—for meals in the homes of members: “They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Although eating together was a sign of the believers’ unity and care for one another, we do not know whether they understood these meals to be the Lord’s Supper. A typical meal in first-century Jerusalem included porridge made of boiled grains. Fish, yogurt, or cheese provided protein for the more fortunate. Other foods included olives, figs, fruits, and seasonal vegetables. Meat would have been served rarely—such as at religious festivals. Although these communal meals probably were not elaborate banquets, they likely provided their poorest members with more food than they would have had otherwise.

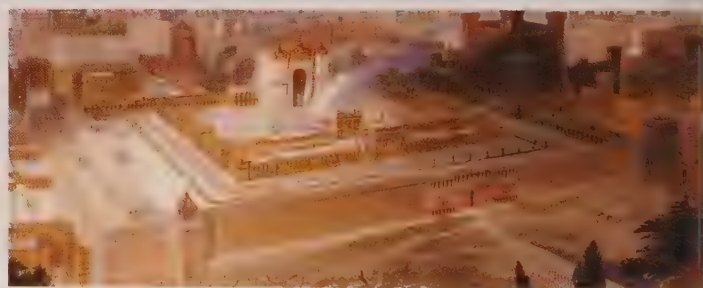
In Greek and Roman culture, a typical dinner party lasted at least three hours. An evening meal was followed by “libations”—a ritual in which the host poured out drinks in honor of a god. Important individuals might be remembered and honored. As people drank their wine (usually mixed with water) there was a “symposium,” an extended time for conversation, which sometimes also included music and other entertainment. It is possible that the believers’ gatherings adopted a similar pattern, which may have been familiar to Gentile believers and Greek-speaking Jews, but with the guests honoring Christ rather than pagan gods. The conversation time would have included discussions about Jesus. Those gathered probably sang hymns.

A letter from Paul suggests that the church at Corinth did not treat its poorest members with the same dignity as the wealthy in their meal gatherings (1 Corinthians 11:20–22). In contrast, the Jerusalem church is described in ideal terms, with most believers sharing generously with one another (Acts 2:44–47).

Many houses in Jerusalem were small, one-room buildings. Sometimes homeowners built additions or upper levels for storage, guest rooms, or extra living space. On summer nights, the roof was the most

comfortable place to sleep. A typical family crowded into a single room. In favorable weather much of their activity, including work, cooking, and eating, would have been outdoors in a courtyard shared with others. Wealthy people built houses in a large U-shape, with all three sides opening out onto a central courtyard that was enclosed by a gate on the fourth side to offer protection at night. People could socialize in the courtyard or meet in one of the larger rooms.

Acts 1:13 says that the earliest believers gathered in an upper room, space that was either rented or provided free of charge by a supporter. As the movement grew, the followers outgrew their meeting spaces. They probably divided into smaller groups, meeting in homes or courtyards. One such home belonged to Mary, mother of John Mark. Her home, which had an outer gate, provided space where “many had gathered and were praying” (Acts 12:12). Mary had a number of servants—a sign of her wealth and status.



Hebrews and Hellenists

The Jerusalem church experienced cultural divisions early in its life. Acts 6:1 says a dispute arose between the “Hebrews” and the “Hellenists.” The Hebrews were Jews who spoke primarily Aramaic, an ancient language spoken in Palestine. As lifelong residents of Judea or Galilee, they might have known some Greek, but they did not necessarily speak it fluently. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews who had been raised in the Diaspora (“dispersion”), places beyond Palestine where Jews were scattered or dispersed. Sometimes Diaspora Jews were less conservative in ritual practice

than lifelong residents of Judea.

Raised in Tarsus in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Paul would have been considered Hellenist. Many Hellenist Jews from the Diaspora moved to Jerusalem, but may not have needed to know much Aramaic. They could conduct their lives primarily in Greek. Some older individuals longed to die and be buried in the Holy City. This may account for the presence of Hellenist widows.

According to Acts 6:1, the Hellenists complained that their widows had been overlooked “in the daily distribution.” In the past, biblical scholars assumed that impoverished Hellenist widows were not receiving charity from the community. More recently, scholars have suggested that the problem was that widows, particularly the wealthier women, competed for the honor of organizing or hosting the community meals. Preference may have been given to the Hebrews, the lifetime residents of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church responded to this conflict by selecting Hellenist deacons to handle administrative details (Acts 6:3–6).

Remembering the poor

The generosity of wealthier members was not enough to fully alleviate the need in the Jerusalem church. In the 40s A.D., Jerusalem experienced several food shortages. Churches in other cities responded with concern. At a time of widespread famine, believers in the Syrian city of Antioch collected resources to aid the church in Judea. Paul and Barnabas delivered this gift (Acts 11:27–30).

In the early 50s A.D., Paul reports that James, Peter, and John asked the Gentile churches to “remember the poor” in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:10). Paul spent at least five years organizing a substantial monetary collection. Two chapters of 2 Corinthians (chapters 8 and 9) are devoted to “the ministry to the saints” in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1). Paul also mentions the collection in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 and Romans 15:25–31. Congregations in Achaia (Greece) and Macedonia con-

tributed. In the ancient world, people understood their social interactions in terms of “honor and shame.” Elite men and women donated public buildings, sponsored gladiatorial spectacles and cultural performances, and provided distributions of food. They gained honor through extravagant displays of generosity, which led to public praise. The beneficiary often received not only financial help but also a social obligation—to praise the patron publicly or otherwise return the favor. Failure or inability to do this led to shame. In his interactions with believers, Paul turned cultural expectations upside down. While organizing the collection to benefit individuals in profound financial need, Paul emphasized that it was not his intent for the church in Jerusalem to become “beholden” to the Gentile congregations providing this offering. Instead, he suggested that the Gentile believers were offering this ministry in thanksgiving for spiritual benefits they received from the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:26–27).

Even as he gathered the collection, Paul was also in conflict with the Jerusalem leaders. Paul felt that Peter had reneged on an earlier agreement that circumcision was not required for the unity of believers (Galatians 2:1–14). Given this, Paul may have considered himself honor-bound to deliver the collection as a sign that he and the Gentile churches were acting in good faith. Paul expressed anxiety about the collection, fearing the gift would not be substantial enough (2 Corinthians 9:3–5) or that, due to his conflict with them, the Jerusalem church might not receive it favorably (Romans 15:30–31).

The Bible does not tell us how the offering was received in Jerusalem, but Paul’s words remind Christians today about the spiritual blessings (Romans 15:27) we have received from Jesus’ earliest witnesses in Jerusalem, whose message has spread to the ends of the earth. 🌿

The Rev. Dr. Joy A. Schroeder, an ELCA pastor, teaches church history at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University in Columbus, Ohio.



What Makes *jesus* Mad?

by Bev Stratton

One way to draw closer to God is to use our imaginations. The Ignatian spiritual exercises, taught by Catholic Jesuits, invite Christians to imagine ourselves as characters in biblical stories. What if we imagine a modern-day Jesus? The story of the widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4) tells about Jesus' fury at an unjust temple system that deprived widows and orphans of what they needed to survive. Today, we might ask, "What makes Jesus mad?" not "What would Jesus do?"

Those who wear WWJD (What would Jesus do) bracelets may feel confident that they know the answer to this question. Often their proposals reflect their politics and prejudices. We may claim no better in suggesting

what makes Jesus mad, but we can temper our imaginations by engaging with Scripture and with one another.

When we consider anger, whether Jesus' or our own, we notice differences in how we handle emotions. I live in the land of "Minnesota nice"—we do our best not to let anyone know we're angry. We fail, of course. Our anger seeps out in our body language and sometimes through snide comments or passive-aggressive actions.

Jesus was human too. Sometimes he let his anger get the best of him. But he also expressed it directly, denouncing the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy or hardness of heart (Matthew 23; Mark 3:5). As Harriet Lerner in *The Dance of Anger* recom-



woman who could enrich many lives with her gifts. She needs to earn a living wage. Jesus would be furious that the richest nation in the world is not designing policies to promote just, sustainable livelihood for all—both within our borders and through our trade agreements that impact global labor practices.

Mental health and suicide

An acquaintance of mine described a high school student whose mother lives with a serious mental illness. His siblings are in foster care, and he rarely attends school due to debilitating depression. Friends, students, and colleagues of mine have had relatives die by suicide.

In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly cast out demons that tormented people and cut them off from human relationships. Jesus would be furious at a mental health care system that is inadequately structured and funded to provide the care people need. Jesus would be livid that while rates are declining for many diseases, the World Health Organization still estimates that one person dies by suicide every 40 seconds.

Immigrants, racism

recommends, Jesus helped Martha to translate her anger at Mary into a clearer understanding of herself—as worried and anxious (Luke 10:38–42). Scripture gives us clues about what might make Jesus mad in our world today and where we may wish to use our anger to clarify our sense of self.

Economic justice

The story of the widow in Luke 21:1–4 suggests one area that would make Jesus furious—economic disparities and conditions that fail to meet basic human needs. My friend has not had a job since the 2009 recession. There are complicating factors, but she is a talented

Jesus is mad when we demean and exclude one another or treat one another unjustly. Jesus challenged Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50) when he judged a woman—and Jesus for caring about her—on the basis of Simon's perceptions of her sins and immorality. Jesus warned the rich man of eternal consequences when he walked by the poor man at his gate, refusing to give him food (Luke 16:19–31).

Jesus would be furious that refugees are being deported from countries where they seek asylum to countries where they face persecution or where there is insufficient economic opportunity for them to stay with the families and friends they would prefer. Jesus would be irate that employers take advantage of undocumented workers, subjecting them to low wages, pesticides, and other dangerous working conditions. Jesus

would be enraged that people of color are killed with impunity because hatred, prejudice, and racism persist and because procedures are not in place to counteract stereotypes.

Anti-racism activist Peggy McIntosh reminds me of my privilege as a White woman in her words, "I do not need to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection." My African American and other minority peers have no such privilege. That makes Jesus angry.

When he held some power as a beloved rabbi, Jesus learned inclusivity and compassion from the Syro-phoenecian woman who challenged his prejudiced reaction to her (Mark 7:24–30). He would be angry at Whites and other peoples of privilege in the U.S. who do not similarly use their power to empower others.

Transgender people

Transgender people sing behind me in the church pew, seek counseling in my office, present their stories to my professional organization, and write poignant memoirs. Many agonize over bodies that seem not to fit who they know they are, and some celebrate when medical and mental health professionals help them reconcile their inner and outer worlds. Yet lawyer Ellie Krug's blog (<http://elliekrug.com/my-blog/>) reports that 33 states in the U.S. "provide no legal protection for trans folk." A mental health professional who works with transgender clients estimates that one-third to one-half of transgender teens attempt suicide before or during high school. "Minority stress" from the stigma they experience in a bi-gendered culture can make life seem insufferable for transgender teens.

We cannot tell from the gospels how Jesus might

respond to transgender people today, but Acts 8:26–40 may give a clue. There, the Holy Spirit directed the apostle Philip to speak to someone of unusual sexual characteristics, an Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch had to advocate for himself, persuading Philip to help him understand Scripture and challenging Philip to allow the eunuch's baptism. If the Spirit brought the good news to a sexual minority person in the time of the early church, leaving him rejoicing, we can reasonably conclude that the mistreatment of transgender people would make Jesus mad today.

Jesus was
human too.



Other clues

While the gospels provide intimate portrayals of Jesus' humanity and teaching, other scripture in both testaments provides clues for what would anger Jesus and the God to whom he prayed. The author of Ephesians speaks of Christ breaking down the dividing wall of hostility, reconciling groups who were at odds, and proclaiming peace (Ephesians 2:11–22).

In that Spirit, we can work with others to ease hostility and foster understanding between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims and Christians who experience injustice and hostility and who long for safety and a chance to live peacefully in the lands they call home.

Paul in Philippians 4:2–3 and in 1 Corinthians knows that human beings experience divisions with one another—both as individuals and when factions arise in the church. But he exhorts church members to address these conflicts and offers the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1–11) and the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13:13) as metaphors of humility, unity, and love. That suggests that if Jesus is furious with our mistreatment of one another, he also models and provides a means of coming together.

Responding to anger

We learn from biblical texts various ways that God expresses anger and ways we might respond to our anger. When God was angry, God often sent prophets to speak to the people. The people of Israel understood God to have crushed them (Isaiah 10:5–6) or kindled God’s anger against them (Judges 3:7–11), letting them experience the consequences of their sin until they cried out to God. Hosea described God’s hurt at human abandonment, idolatry, and betrayal leading God to act abusively—threatening deprivation and restriction (Hosea 2:1–13).

Yet while Israel may have understood and portrayed God’s anger in cruel ways—against both themselves and others—first testament writers also speak of God’s anger being replaced by comfort and healing (Isaiah 12:1, 57:16–18) and by steadfast love and faithfulness (Hosea 2:14–23). They show God being angry with would-be righteous people who do not speak their anger and pain directly to God as Job does (Job 42:7) and portray God as providing object lessons and gently chastising self-righteous individuals who are angry at God’s grace and mercy (Jonah 4).

When using the Bible to guide our responses to anger, we need to distinguish between places where the writers’ depictions of God’s anger reflect patriarchal metaphors of their time (such as rape in Ezekiel 16) and where they may present a model worthy of emulation. A biblical refrain can be a clue. God is repeatedly described as being “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

Similarly, we need to exercise caution in reading the New Testament. Paul is hostile when the gospel is at stake in Galatia by people who threaten freedom by demanding circumcision for Gentile believers. Yet his wish that people who do so castrate themselves (Galatians 5:12) is best seen as hyperbolic invective physically suited to the theological crime rather than as

a model for responding to anger. Instead, we might follow the admonition not to let the sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26) or the example of the apostolic church that searched the scripture, listened to the Spirit, and used persuasive conversation to respond to conflict in its midst (Acts 15).

What does a furious Jesus do?

In the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus notices and names things that are amiss (Luke 21:1–4). When someone is misjudged or treated unfairly, like the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50), Jesus names the injustice and offers forgiveness, kindness, and peace.

As Jesus did, we might moderate our anger and learn from those who challenge us about our own narrowness and blind spots (Mark 7:24–30). Jesus tells parables of outcasts who ignore stereotypes and prejudice to show compassion (Luke 10:25–37). When confronted with the unkindness of people who we think should know better, we might similarly learn effective ways to respectfully challenge unacceptable behaviors, for example, how to tell someone they sound racist. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0Ti-gkJiXc>.)

Jesus also handled his anger by contravening stereotypes, speaking to a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:1–42). He took direct action to dismantle unjust systems, overturning the tables of moneychangers at the temple (Mark 11:15–17). Today, Jesus might channel his anger by following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s non-violent resistance protocol, learned from Mahatma Gandhi and recently depicted in the movie “Selma” as “We negotiate, we demonstrate, we resist.”

Our imaginations can help us read Scripture and our world in ways that use anger to bring new self-understanding and to act in ways that bring new life. 🌸
Bev Stratton, Professor of Religion at Augsburg College, spent the past year helping students at the St. Olaf College Counseling Center name and respond to their emotions.

BE LIKE THE WIDOW

NO CATCHY SLOGANS by Emma Crossen

Materials you may want**Bible**, open to Luke 21**Note pad** for yourself *(optional)***One easel or large board** for someone to take notes during the group discussion *(optional)***Hymn**“Canticle of the Turning” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 723)**Focus verse**

LUKE 21:1–4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

This month, we turn our attention to a story that is commonly called “the widow’s mite.” Before you read the verses in the Bible, is there anyone in your group willing to tell the story in her own words? If someone else has a different version in mind, she is welcome to share, too.

When you’re ready, ask someone to read aloud from Luke 21:1–4. We’ll use Luke’s version for our

study. It’s similar to the version in Mark 12:41–44. If you like, read this version, too.

Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you’re a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow 5 minutes for discussion.

1. What rule about giving do we often take from this passage?
2. How do you feel about this rule?
3. Do you follow it?

Using and misusing the text

Many preachers and teachers use this story to encourage sacrificial giving, to say that Jesus wants us to give more of our resources (money, time, skills) to the church, just like the widow.

Sacrificial giving is about justice, they say. If the widow can give everything she has to live on, it’s only just that you and I, who have more, give more of our abundance.

In an article called “Widow’s Mite or Widow’s Plight,” André Resner says this story is a good example of a common problem in biblical interpretation. Our traditional use of a text can blind us from seeing any

anything other than what we've always seen (*Review and Expositor*, Fall 2010).

What if Jesus is pointing to a bigger injustice? In a society where widows were to be cared for, what if Jesus is mad that the widow would give up everything she has—and that the temple would allow it to happen? What if *that* is the injustice?

In this month's Bible study, we'll take a cue from Resner and consider what we may be missing because of our preconceived notions about this story. (See "What Makes Jesus Mad," p. 26.)

When and where

READ AGAIN LUKE 21:1–4.

In the Gospels of Luke and Mark, this story appears during the last week of Jesus' life. It is set a few days after Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to the crowd's cheers of praise. Within the week, he would be arrested and put to death after sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. Until then, he spent his days going to the temple, teaching his disciples and others who gathered with them. That's where we meet him in this story.

For Jesus and his fellow Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was arguably the most important place on earth. Individuals and families brought their sacrifices, and the priests carried out the ritual actions required to make those sacrifices satisfactory to God.

The temple comprised a massive complex of gathering spaces, marble walls, columns, and staircases. Jesus would likely have been teaching in these outer areas of the temple complex. Women were only allowed to go as far as the Court of Women, which contained the treasury where people deposited coin offerings into dedicated receptacles. This is where Jesus encountered the widow.

The timing of this story is also important. It is the festival of Passover, arguably the most important and busiest time of year in the temple. Thousands of Jews would have come from throughout the Roman Empire

to bring sacrifices and enjoy the party. For those who wanted to celebrate Passover to its fullest, Jerusalem was the place to be.

Jesus was practically guaranteed a good crowd when he showed up to the temple each day during the Passover week. His message, however, was a direct challenge to the pomp and fanfare around him. His teachings during that week were highly critical of the temple and the religious authorities. Passover was their time to shine, but Jesus was not playing along.

Tensions are high

The story of the widow's mite follows a series of tense interactions between Jesus and the religious authorities. Luke writes:

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard. (19:47–48)

Among his more provocative remarks, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44). He then makes a big scene when he flips over the tables of the moneychangers (Luke 19:45–46). (John puts this scene near the beginning of his gospel). Then he tells a parable that seems to be critical of the temple authorities (Luke 20:9–19). They try multiple times to trick him into saying something unlawful so they can have him arrested. Jesus doesn't fall for it. Then, Luke writes:

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

What the text says and does not say

Our goal in this Bible study is to see how our precon-

WHAT THE TEXT TELLS US

1. Jesus sees rich people and a widow making offerings.
2. He explains that the widow has just given up everything she has to live on.
3. He says this is different from the rich people giving out of their abundance.
4. He says that the widow has given “more” because her gift is a greater proportion of her assets.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

(add your/your group's thoughts to this list)

1. How Jesus feels about the widow's actions.

ceived notions can keep us from seeing what's actually there.

So, let's make a chart (See above). On one side, we'll put what the text is clearly telling us, based only on Luke 21:1–4. On the other side, let's put what we do not know.

In these four verses, Jesus does not tell us whether he likes the widow's offering or the rich people's offerings. Popularly, we assume that he is praising the widow when he says that she has “put in more than all of them.” This, however, is a preconceived notion that we bring to the text.

From these four verses, we don't know if Jesus is pleased with the widow's offering. However, if we accept the idea that he is pleased, then we have to accept this conclusion: Jesus likes the idea of a widow giving up everything she has to religious authorities, even when that gift makes her destitute.

Talk about it

Are you comfortable with this conclusion? Does it match your understanding of Jesus? Based on Luke 21:1–4, do you see any evidence that Jesus wants us to

follow the widow's example?

We've considered that these four verses may provide little evidence that Jesus admires the widow or wants us to follow her lead. Yet, is there any evidence that he dislikes the widow's offering?

We find some important clues by going back two verses in the story. Recall what happened earlier at the temple, during Jesus' tense back-and-forth with the chief priests and scribes. Having failed to get Jesus arrested, they presumably gave up. Luke says, “they no longer dared to ask him another question” (Luke 20:40). Jesus, on the other hand, would not let it go. He turned to his disciples, and without lowering his voice, made a bold statement about his challengers. You can almost hear the derisive tone in Jesus' voice:

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and love to be greeted with respect in the market places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. (Luke 20:46–47)

This is the moment when Luke says, “He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the

treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins." Then, as if to underline his point about the scribes, Jesus says,

Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on." (Luke 21:3-4)

Here, the repeated reference to widows deserves our attention. Just seconds before seeing the widow in the temple, Jesus was blaming the scribes and priests for devouring the house of widows. Then he looks up and sees the widow making her offering. Could it be that her offering is the perfect illustration of what he was just saying?

The widow's plight

Widows were among the most vulnerable people in Jesus' place and time, though some had means (e.g., John Mark's mother in Acts 12:12-13). When Jesus identifies the widow as "poor," he uses the Greek word *ptochē*. This was a word used for those whose poverty reduced them to begging. In the social structure of the time, a woman's family relationships determined her social status, where she lived, how her household earned a living, and what assets she had to spend. Widows and orphans, deprived of vital family relationships, were especially vulnerable to losing the social and material supports they needed to survive.

In light of this need, Jews and early Christians were known for placing a high priority on serving the poor. In last month's Bible study, we looked at the spiritual practice of almsgiving. It was based on the Jewish belief that God was incarnate among the poor, so much so that many Jewish writers said that giving to the poor was equal to bringing a sacrifice to the temple.

This idea was reinforced in the early church. The book of James says: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans

and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). (See "The Early Church in Jerusalem," p. 22.)

In saying this, James echoed a long Jewish tradition of placing alms at the center of Jewish practice. Jesus' own ministry seems to reinforce this worldview in which interacting with the poor is the best way to please God. Recall from the June Bible study Jesus' final words to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. He says in no uncertain terms that God will judge them based on whether they feed the hungry, heal the sick, and visit the prisoner.

Pleased or disgusted?

The popular reading of the widow's mite says that Jesus was pleased by the widow's offering. Yet, when we consider how Jesus felt about serving the poor, especially widows, we can imagine that the sight of the widow giving her last coin was not pleasant at all. We can imagine that it may, in fact, have violated Jesus' ideals about how the temple should function.

Let's review the scene. Jesus is teaching in the temple during Passover. The scribes and priests are trying to have him killed. He can hardly stand the sight of these hypocrites, parading around in their long robes, expecting everyone to treat them with respect while they take from widows and allow the temple to violate one of the central tenets of the Jewish faith: care for the widow and orphan. Then, as soon as he's said all this, Jesus looks up and sees exactly what he's been talking about—a poor widow giving away everything she has to those same priests.

Could it be that Jesus is mad at the widow for giving it away? We don't know. What Luke tells us is that Jesus is furious at the religious leaders who perpetuate a religious system in which it would be acceptable for a widow to lose everything she has for the sake of the temple.

Jesus expressed this anger immediately before he sees

the widow (Luke 20:46–47). The anger is confirmed by what he says after the widow makes her offering.

READ LUKE 21:1–4 AGAIN, THIS TIME CONTINUING ON TO VERSES 5 AND 6.

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Seen in this context, it seems likely that Jesus is not advocating for anyone—rich or poor—to give *more* to the temple. Instead, he is questioning the very premise that the temple is worth supporting at all, at least in the long run.

In fact, by centering on the widow as the focal point of this story, have we missed Jesus' point entirely? Could it be that Jesus is far more concerned about the bigger picture—a religious system that has turned its back from its primary obligation to care for the poor? Could it be that the widow is not a role model? Could it be that Jesus is more concerned with changing how the church treats the poor, and less concerned with how individuals give to the church?

Talk about it

How do you feel after hearing this interpretation of the widow's mite?

If you accept that the widow is not a role model, what do you lose? What do you gain?

What about the widow?

If the widow is not a role model for us to follow, then what

do we do with her? Do we pay less attention to her?

To the contrary, Jesus seems to be saying that we should pay more attention to the widow. If this passage has anything to say to us today, it is calling us to pay more attention to the most vulnerable, to those without rights and resources. It calls us to take notice of how they are impacted by churches and other systems in which we have power and influence.

Yet, the attention Jesus calls for is not to turn the widow's story into a generic message about our giving behavior. When we do this, we turn our attention away from the widow's situation and instead start worrying about our own generosity. We start to ask ourselves, "Are we giving enough?"

What if Jesus' message is this—pay far less attention to whether you qualify or are recognized as generous and far more attention to meeting the needs of the poor? Jesus seems to want religious communities in which those with abundance give enough that the community can and does care for the poor and vulnerable.

If we want to follow Jesus' example, we will show up where decisions are made and where our faith is proclaimed, just as Jesus showed up in the temple during Passover, and demand that sufficient resources go toward serving the poor and vulnerable.

In this way, Jesus calls us to focus even more on the widow and those she represents. We are not, however, to turn them into stories that inspire us to be better people. We are to see them as they are when they are suffering to the point of destitution. And, we are to see ourselves as we are, inspired and called by faith to demand justice, especially from our churches and religious leaders.

What about sacrificial giving?

If the widow is not a role model for sacrificial giving, does this mean that Jesus does not want us to give more of ourselves to the church, including time, talent, and money?

No. It just means that we can't use this story to make that point. The Bible gives us many other verses that offer specific, if competing, opinions about how much we should give away. Consider just a few:

- A rich man asks Jesus what he must do to obtain eternal life, and Jesus tells him to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. (Mark 10, Matthew 19, Luke 18)
- Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for not being able to care for their parents because they've given all of their property to God. (Mark 7:10-13)
- Paul tells the Christians in Rome to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. (Romans 12:1)
- In Acts, Paul tells the church leaders at Ephesus to practice a trade and earn their own income so that they don't depend on charity but can instead offer charity to the weak. (Acts 20:35)
- The Old Testament introduces the concept of tithing, or giving a portion of income to serve the larger community. (Deuteronomy 14:22)

An entire Bible study series could be devoted to exploring the different opinions about sacrificial giving in the

Bible. Our experience with the widow's mite should remind us, however, to be cautious about coming to quick conclusions.

For now, the important consideration is this: The story of the widow's mite may not be a call to sacrificial giving. It may be a revelation of how mad Jesus gets when the temple does not serve the poor. If we make it a story about personal giving, we fail to see that Jesus is talking about community accountability. We fail to see that Jesus is far less concerned with who gives enough, and far more concerned with how the religious community uses what it receives.

Prayer

God, our creator, you reveal yourself in anger and encouragement. Open our hearts to accept your challenge of seeing the poor and vulnerable as they are, and seeing our churches and institutions as they are. Give us the courage to be angry and the energy to help bring about change. In your name, Amen. 🌿

Emma Crossen is the development director at the Courage Campaign. She studied ministry at Harvard Divinity School, and previously served Women of the ELCA as director for stewardship and development.

WELCA @ ELCA Youth Gathering, July 15-19 2015



Youth can learn about human trafficking in the Community Life area at the Cobo Center and adult leaders can enjoy a space just for them. Tell your congregation's group to find Women of the ELCA at the ELCA Youth Gathering.

Women of the ELCA





FAMILY MATTERS

Detroit or Bust

by Sue Gamelin

Nine teenagers and two young adults from our congregation are getting ready to pile into our well-worn, invariably smelly church van. We scrounged up suitcases for those who didn't have them, and bought them cheap TracFones to make sure that we could find them if they got lost in the huge crowds awaiting them. They'll make their half-excited, half-scared way north 650 miles to Detroit. It will take 12 or more hours of driving, but they're relieved we didn't have enough money for airplane tickets. "Too scary," they said in unison. None of the teens have ever flown.

Where are they headed? The national youth gathering, a.k.a. "Rise Up!" When they pull into Detroit, they'll move into a dorm at Wayne State University, where the Multicultural Youth Leadership Event (MYLE) will be held. They'll join other African American teens at MYLE, as well as teens from the Asian American, Latino, Native American, Arab American, and Alaskan Native communities—500 people altogether. They look forward to not being a minority at an ELCA event! Four days later they'll pour onto Ford Field in downtown Detroit, joining a river of 35,000 wiggly and giggly, singing and laughing Lutheran teens from all over. Minority again.

It has taken a lot of determination for our group to go to Detroit. You see, the kids in our congregation are from families living near or below the poverty line. Our congregation, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, is planted firmly in the Warners-

ville community of Greensboro, N.C., an area with a memorable history. The land was purchased by Quakers from Pennsylvania after the Civil War and sold to freed slaves for reasonable prices. Those families built their homes, their schools and their stores on this land. They named this community after the friend who headed up the project. Warnersville was torn down and rebuilt during the War on Poverty in the 1960s and 1970s, and that's when an ELCA predecessor, the Lutheran Church in America, established our congregation.

Today the average family income for Warnersville residents is a little less than \$21,000. Families of four in the United States are considered to be below the poverty line if they have less than \$24,250 annual income.

Our area is a food desert. Residents are more than a mile from a full-service grocery store. It's hard to maintain a car on the income of many families around us. Yes, it's possible to walk two miles to the closest grocery store in our area. But have you ever walked home the same two miles carrying loaded grocery bags? Food insecurity is a reality; 80 percent of the families in North Carolina who are on food assistance don't know where their next meal will come from. One in four children in our city is food insecure.

Some of the 37 children who are regulars at our small congregation have moms who work as unlicensed caregivers or in nursing homes as cleaners or licensed practical nurses (LPNs). In Greensboro the average annual wage for an LPN is

\$14,500. A number of our families are headed by single mothers. Where there is a dad present, almost all are without high school diplomas and remain unemployed. They watch over the children and household while their wives work. I don't know what their families would do without their house-husbanding.

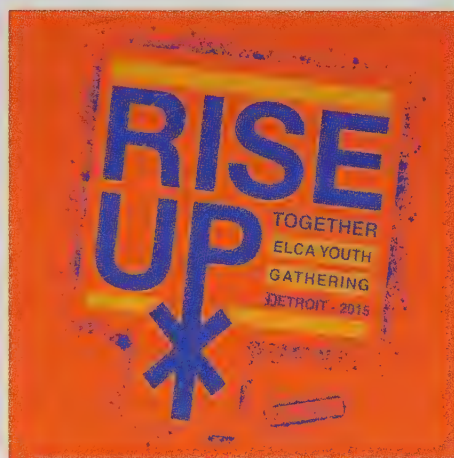
I grew up in a European American family that knew hard times. But I had the advantages of class and race—and the encouragement of family and school to excel and to establish college and career as a goal. It was a “can do” world, and the American dream was real for us.

The youth in our congregation live in a different world. Seven of our nine teenagers going to Detroit are African American boys. Their parents have had “The Talk” with them, telling them how they must conduct themselves when confronted by people who hold racial stereotypes. Encouragement for success in school often is second to making it through each day. The high school graduation rate in our area is consistently higher for white youth than for black.

Unemployment is a reality for those without a high school diploma. Drugs, alcohol, and teenage pregnancy have taken their toll on some families. This is the American nightmare, not the dream. Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in Amer-*

ica, describes this world from the vantage point of an outsider who attempted to live and survive in it. Nevertheless the families at Prince of Peace don't give up. I've learned how hard they work to survive and to reach their goals for a better life.

How are teenagers from our congregation able to go to Detroit for MYLE and Rise Up? ELCA scholarships, grants from three congregations, checks from friends of the congregation, and \$100 from



each of the teens' families (given \$10 per month) have filled our empty pockets. Most of these generous donors have asked if this money should be spent more usefully on food or clothing or closer, less expensive field trips.

I haven't had any trouble answering these questions. This Detroit adventure will give our kids many opportunities. Most haven't been outside the borders of North Carolina. Some months their families can't afford to pay the water

bill or rent or fix the broken-down family car, much less take vacations.

Our teenagers don't know what a university dorm is like. They haven't been able to think about themselves living in one. They don't really believe that there are lots of other kids in the ELCA whose skin color is close to theirs. In territory filled with Baptists and Methodists, they don't realize that the ELCA is a church of 4 million people in the United States and part of 72 million Lutherans around the world. They haven't heard the stories of faith, love, and courage that will ring out in Ford Field by presenters whose witness will stun into silence the stadium full of teenagers. They will love MYLE's multicultural worship, then will be amazed when praise reverberates from 35,000 followers of Jesus. Our teens can't imagine that they can go to Detroit—Detroit!—home of the Lions and Pistons, Fords and Motown, and make a difference by helping the city with their hard work on a service project.

It's “Detroit or Bust.” They *are* going to make it there—and may well bust from excitement when they arrive. 🌿

The Rev. Sue Gamelin is a retired ELCA pastor who washes the feet of homeless folks and low income children and youth in North Carolina. She and her husband, Tim, have four grown children and their spouses and 11 grandchildren.



Why 'Slow Faith'?

by Liv Larson Andrews

I contribute to a local, faith-related news source called Spokane Faith and Values (spokanefavv.com). My editor occasionally offers the chance to read and review books for the blog portion of the website.

Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus by Chris Smith and John Pattison came across her desk, and she passed it to me. I was hooked by the title alone. There are all sorts of words I love in there: cultivation, community, patience. I was excited.

However, as the book itself urges, I took it slowly. I had to. Early chapters on place, stability, and ecology presented challenges to me. Suddenly I was not only reviewing a book but looking deeply at my own life. I needed to face areas of life in which I was impatient with others, with institutions, and even with myself.

While I felt drawn to all things “slow,”—money, food, urban development, education—I simultaneously felt pressure to perform at the rate of most of society: breakneck speed. Reading the first few chapters of this little book brought me to a halt.

Questioning assumptions

I’m not alone. In response to our speeding-up world, groups of people around the globe are opting to take life Slowly, with a capital “S.” As I learned more about this movement, mostly from Carl Honore’s book *In Praise of Slowness*, I felt drawn in. The counter-cultural nature of their efforts, their bravery in questioning assumptions, and the playfulness about their goals reminded me of the disciples of Jesus.

Certainly the teachings of Jesus seemed absurd to bystanders and earned scorn for the disciples. Similarly, the Society for the Deceleration of Time probably sounds ridiculous to our ears. After all, you can’t slow time. But this group, among others, is dedicated to slowing our movement through time and maintaining a spirit of restful joy while doing so. I found myself smiling and chuckling while discovering the world in slow movement.

I began wondering how many of my neighbors and colleagues—in and out of the church—might have

the same joyful response. Was the slow movement just another cool trend? Would it really yield change? Finally, I wondered what might already be present in our Scripture and faith tradition to call us into a holy slowing down.

When *Gather* asked me to consider writing a three-session Bible study, this topic was a natural fit. I was already living some of the questions about a biblical provision for the pace of our lives.

Self-worth, grace & productivity

As I checked in with friends and parishioners, I found that the frenetic pace of life had theological consequences. Many friends reported feeling that their self-worth was connected to productivity, not to God's grace. They (and I include myself in this group) are quite capable of saying out loud, "I am God's beloved child, worthy of love."

But deep within, another voice held sway. If they felt they had not worked sufficiently that day, if they had not checked enough items off their list or made progress in some measurable way, they felt like failures. No love. In the worst case, one friend spoke about being sick for an extended time, missing so much work that she felt she "didn't deserve to exist."

Seeing that despair and distance from God are some of the theological wages of the ever speeding-up, productivity-based society, I wanted to explore what theological gifts or blessings reside in the invitation to slow down.

I wanted to discover what prophetic witness the church might be able to offer the speeding world. On the other hand, I wanted to wrestle with instances in which it's not good to be slow, as when God's call awakens us to deliberate action or when we are weary of suffering and oppression.

I brought these goals and questions to the Bible. I did not land on a specific book, character or event, as many *Gather* Bible studies use. Instead I found a reverberating echo, a repeated call throughout Scripture to embrace

patience and rest in God. From the radical gift of the Sabbath (it sounds especially crazy to us now to be told "do not work" for a whole day) to the psalms wrestling with longing and trust and on to the parables of Jesus, Scripture holds up a vision for living in God's time.

All in God's own time

We cannot rush the growth of the seed that lands in good soil or the yeast leavening the dough. It happens in God's own time. God's plan for us, rather than a list of tasks, is to be like the seed and the yeast: to do our work in God's time, and to experience restful joy all our days. Balance in work, ample time for play, and care for the neighbor made possible by shared rhythms of community—this is Sabbath living. This is Slow Faith.

Of course, as with any faith practice, there is the risk of offering just one more yardstick of evaluation or standard of spirituality. I would hate for this study to make false promises of "just slow down a bit and you'll be happy." I don't think that is the biblical vision.

All good things come from the gracious hand of God. We cannot dictate or control those gifts. But we can explore those treasures we already have been given, even as the clay jars holding them are cracking open. Let us hold back from further judging ourselves ("I don't take enough time off") and instead creatively imagine how we might experiment with opening gifts such as the Sabbath.

Let's bring our laments together in one voice, hearing each other's pain, bearing each other's hopes. Let's examine the seed and the yeast and wonder what wisdom they contain for our lives. Finally, let us follow the example of the psalmist and praise God who gives us everything we need "in due season." I pray you enjoy this Bible study and, as much as possible, take it slowly. 🌿

The Rev. Liv Larson Andrews is the pastor of Salem Lutheran in Spokane, Wash. She lives with her husband and young son, and dreams of hosting a lectionary-based cooking show.

GRACE-FULL LIVING

by Emily Hansen



and where to direct our financial resources. As women, we have particular motivations that stand behind these decisions. We ask ourselves, "What matters to me? How can I make a difference?"

Look back to move ahead

It can be helpful to examine our history—what attitudes we learned and how we reach our decisions today.

Read Romans 12:9–13: *"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be*

Money matters. It's a matter of faith.

Our spiritual calling affects how we decide to use what we have, and the effects of our faith-filled generosity can be seen in our communities of faith.

In Romans 12:2, Paul writes that we can be transformed, and that from that transformation, we can do good in our church, society, and world. Here's what he says:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

We are called as people of faith to take care of one another and to live in peace with one another. Through our giving, we have the capacity not only to change as individuals but to bring about great change around us. And when we accept our responsibility to do good in society, we find a multitude of options for where, how, and with what resources this renewal can take place.

We all make decisions, large and small, about how

ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

This passage may remind us of a grandmother handing out food to men and women traveling along old railroad tracks behind farm fields. Or we may remember being taught to carry coins for the Sunday school offering, or gathering donations for the church pantry.

The stewardship and hospitality shown by our family and friends were extensions of their faith and ultimately of our own.

Our feelings about the role of money and the other valuable resources in our lives are intimately connected to what we were taught or shown in the past by our parents, families, partners, and friends.

Think about your early experiences with money. Did it involve the church? Did your family openly discuss issues of family finances? Do you currently? What about society's relationship with money? Do you talk

about that with your spouse, children or friends?

In her book *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance*, Helen LaKelly Hunt asks us to connect with our own history in order to move forward: “We [should] reflect and draw on the faith traditions of our parents and grandparents. To ignore our tradition is to reject the prayers and wishes that our mothers and grandmothers held in their hearts for us.”

A global church

We are part of a global church and live in a global economy. Our stewardship choices can be far-reaching. It's important to discuss the whys and hows of our giving.

What do women do with their financial resources, and why do they do what they do? The Women's Philanthropy Institute at Indiana University conducted some research to discover the key motivations. Six words, all beginning with the letter C, describe the primary triggers of women's desire to give: create, change, connect, commit, collaborate and celebrate.

That is, women give to **create** solutions to problems; to effect **change** and make a difference; to **connect** with recipients and see the human face of their gifts; to **commit** to organizations and institutions whose vision they share and often to organizations for which they have volunteered; to **collaborate** with others as part of a larger effort; and to **celebrate** their accomplishments and enjoy the deeper meaning of their philanthropy.

It is our ability to give back and our desire for transformation that give us the hope that we are leaving the world better than we found it.

Our giving demonstrates our confidence in the ministry of the church, and that generosity contributes to a more balanced life. The nature and motivations of our giving are integral to our faith because they connect us with one another and with God's means of grace in order that we may truly embrace the notion of grace-full living.

Model generosity

In grace-full living, we are changed by God's grace; and that same grace makes our gifts more valuable to others. We are reminded, for example, in Romans 12:4–8 that we are all members of the one body in Christ—and that we each have different gifts according to the grace given us. That passage asks us to thoughtfully consider our place in the church so that we may model the gifts and skills we have been given.

Perhaps in your own grace-full living, you have not thought of yourself as “the giver” described in that passage. Yet we all show generosity toward others not only in how we use our financial resources, but in how we spend our time and energy. Such generosity is truly a wonderful expression of God's grace.

Giving willingly and with the optimism that our gifts will be used toward God's work is how we model that grace-full generosity. Giving in celebration rather than in competition with others leads to the fullest support of important opportunities and ministries, as we are all one in the body of Christ. Do you see yourself as “the giver”? How so? Our genuine modeling of financial wellness to others comes when we fully embrace “the giver” in ourselves.

We all have the ability to be God's voice to the faith community, connecting with others and giving encouragement to be good stewards. It is truly part of our calling as women of faith to teach others what we know. As women, we are unique in our capacity to shape the world around us because of what we were taught about stewardship and our motivations for it.

Grace-full living means that we can all benefit from our acting on our ability to identify our resources and opportunities for stewardship and service. We have a common vision as women of faith to seek renewal and transformation, not just for ourselves but for the greater community. 🌿

Emily Hansen is the former director for stewardship for Women of the ELCA.

GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

NO CATCHY SLOGANS by Emma Crossen

Materials you may want

Bible, open to 2 Corinthians 8-9

Note pad for yourself

One easel or large board for someone to take notes during the group discussion

Opening hymn

"We all are one in mission" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 576)

Focus verse

2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

In this session, we'll look at Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, from which we get one of the most succinct and upbeat slogans about giving: "God loves a cheerful giver."

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you're a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow 5 minutes for discussion.

What rule about giving do we often take from this passage? How do you feel about this rule? Do you follow it?

"God loves a cheerful giver." It's short and upbeat. It fits nicely on a pew envelope or thank-you card, and it makes a memorable sermon title.

It doesn't tell us what to do. The sentence is not a command. Rather it reminds us of God's preference. Yet, as the phrase is used, it usually carries a tone of criticism or condescension toward another person. Today, "cheerful" usually refers to someone who is openly happy and optimistic. It's one thing to feel cheerful. It's another thing to be told to feel cheerful. "God loves a cheerful giver" usually implies that "You're not being cheerful enough," "You should be happier," or "Stop worrying and enjoy giving away your money."

Cheerful, willing, and eager

The Greek word translated as "cheerful" is *hilaron*. 2 Corinthians 9:7 is its only appearance in the Bible. In the society in which Paul wrote, the word *hilaria* was used to designate festival days. The idea of amusement and celebration resonates with our contemporary understanding of cheerful. If we read verse 7 in its entirety, we see another dynamic implied by *hilaron*.

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul contrasts "cheerful" with "reluctant" and "under compulsion." A cheerful giver, then, is one who gives willingly and eagerly.

So we can change the slogan to "God loves a wil-

ing and eager giver.” Even with this additional explanation, the slogan still sounds somewhat condescending. It’s one thing to be willing and eager. It’s another thing to be told to be willing and eager. It still puts the burden on *you*, the giver, to have the right attitude about your gift. Donors bring legitimate concerns to their giving. Is Paul dismissing these concerns? Is he saying, “Cheer up. Don’t worry about it. Just give. Be happy.”

Of course, it should come as no surprise that Paul was not writing a catchy slogan. He probably did not intend his words to be used 2,000 years later as a general rule about giving. To the contrary, he was writing to a specific group—the church in Corinth—to evoke a specific response about a specific gift: a collection of money for the church in Jerusalem. (See “Prayers Made Tangible,” p. 10.)

A gift for Jerusalem

2 Corinthians is addressed to “the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia” (2 Corinthians 1:1) and was probably written around 57 C.E. Paul founded the church in Corinth approximately five years prior to writing this letter. During that time, he wrote an earlier letter to the church, which appears in the New Testament as 1 Corinthians. He also visited the church at least once. At the beginning of 2 Corinthians, he refers to this as a “painful visit” and urges the church to forgive the person in their community who caused the pain (2 Corinthians 2:5–8).

Paul has a long history with the church at Corinth when he writes 2 Corinthians. Our focus verse comes from chapters 8–9, in which Paul is writing about a specific monetary collection called the “ministry for the saints.” This collection was a major project in Paul’s ministry. He mobilized several Gentile churches, including those at Corinth and Macedonia, to take a special collection over several years to benefit the church in Jerusalem. Paul wrote about this offering:

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 16:1–4

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

Jerusalem was the capital of Judea, a region largely populated by Jews but under the authority of the Roman Empire. Judea is where Jesus carried out his ministry. The church in Jerusalem was made up of Jewish Christians. Though he devoted his ministry to building churches among the Gentiles, Paul had a special concern for the Jerusalem church. In his writings to the Gentile churches, which make up much of the New Testament, Paul suggests that the Gentiles owe a debt of gratitude or compensation for the spiritual blessings that the Jewish Christians gave them.

In writing about the “ministry for the saints” Paul says: *At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15:25–27)*

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s return to 2 Corinthians 8–9, which was written before the offering was complete. In 2 Corinthians 8:1, Paul says that the Macedonian church has already turned over its offering. In the next two chapters, Paul reveals that he is concerned that the church at Corinth won’t follow through on its portion of the offering. This is the context in which he writes, “God loves a cheerful giver.” In chapters 8 and 9, Paul shows why he is concerned and

what he's doing to make sure the gift happens.

Talk about it

Read out loud each set of verses and, as a group, answer the corresponding question.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:3–5.

What steps is Paul taking to make sure the Corinthians are ready to turn over their offering for Jerusalem? Why is he concerned?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16–19.

Who are the brothers whom Paul refers to in 9:3?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–8.

Why does Paul mention the church in Macedonia in his letter to the church in Corinth?

Persuading the Corinthians

This portion of the letter is an excellent example of rhetoric, or writing intended to persuade and impress Paul's audience. Paul is not just communicating the facts—he is playing to the emotions of the Corinthian church. Specifically, he appeals to their pride and competitive spirit. He starts by making sure they know that the Macedonian church has already turned over its part of the offering. Paul says, “Their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (8:2). He appeals to the Corinthians' pride by praising them for their spiritual gifts and, in the same sentence, points out that the Macedonians exceed them in producing material offerings. “We want you to excel also in this generous undertaking” (8:7).

Lest the Corinthians feel inferior, Paul gives them credit for the Macedonians' generosity. In 9:2, he says he has been bragging to the Macedonians about the Corinthians' eagerness and that “your zeal has stirred up most of them.” Even so, Paul goes on to explain

that he is sending the brothers ahead to make sure the Corinthians follow through. “Otherwise,” Paul says, “if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you” (2 Corinthians 9:4).

By praising the Corinthians and comparing them to the Macedonians, Paul is using rhetoric to evoke a specific response. He wants the Corinthians to give willingly and eagerly when he arrives with the Macedonians to collect the offering and take it to Jerusalem.

Talk about it

In small groups, respond to these questions:

What do you think about Paul's message? Have you ever been part of a group that pledged to make a donation to another group? Was there any disagreement about whether to proceed? How would your group have reacted to receiving a letter like this?

Moving on from 2 Corinthians 9:5, Paul's rhetoric turns toward God. He moves away from the logistical details (that is, sending the brothers) and the relationship between Paul, the Macedonians, and the Corinthians. In 9:6–15, he focuses on what this collection means to God and how God's laws are revealed through the collection.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6–15

This is where our catchy slogan appears: “God loves a cheerful giver.” In the context of the large passage, we can see that Paul is using this general statement about God to evoke a particular reaction from the Corinthians. He wants them to follow through on the collection for Jerusalem so they don't embarrass him or themselves. Paul is not saying, “Always be willing to give, no matter what.” Rather, “God loves a cheerful giver” is a form of rhetoric intended to persuade a group within his community about an offering that was important to the entire community.

We're in this together

As a catchy slogan, "God loves a cheerful giver" is usually aimed at the individual giver. We use this slogan to encourage individuals to give joyfully, eagerly, or willingly. The burden of giving cheerfully falls on the individual.

When we use it this way, we miss a critical dynamic in Paul's writing. On every level, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, "We're in this together. Your gift to Jerusalem is part of a larger ministry to the saints. And I am going to do whatever it takes to make sure that we all follow through on this important ministry." In saying to Corinth, "Don't let me down," he's also saying, "I won't let you fail."

Talk about it

In pairs, look at the following verses to answer these questions:

How is Paul showing the Corinthians that their offering is part of a shared project, that the whole community values the gifts they bring, and that the whole community is behind them?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-4

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-24

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-5

Last session, we looked at the story of the widow's mite. We asked this question: What if Jesus is less concerned with individual generosity and more concerned with how the community uses its resources to care for the poor? What if the measure of an individual's giving is found not only in how much she gives, but in whether she is holding her community accountable to use all its gifts appropriately?

It seems, here, that Paul shares the same concern. He models a leadership that looks at the whole community to identify where the need is greatest and to hold all members accountable for giving what they can

to meet that need.

Paul is leading and teaching his Gentile churches, spread throughout a geographic area, to understand themselves as part of the same body of Christ, each with gifts to bring to enhance the common good. He wants each of these churches to understand themselves as part of a single body with a responsibility to share their resources to care for those in greatest need among them.

Unity is a major theme of Paul's ministry. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit....

The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 21-26)

In 2 Corinthians 8-9, we see the lengths to which Paul will go as a leader to ensure this happens. Yes, God loves a cheerful giver. Paul shows us, however, that the burden for giving cheerfully is not on the individual. The burden is on the community to structure its offerings and encourage its members in such a way that they are willing and eager to give of what they have to care for one another.

Talk about it

What are the factors that prevent you from giving cheerfully, without reservation? Make a list.


How can your church community help to address those concerns?

Limits of Wealth

In a detailed study of the role of money in the early church, church historian Justo González summarizes the relation of faith to wealth in Christianity's first three centuries. Those were the centuries before the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Empire and made it fashionable for the rich and powerful to become Christian. Gonzales tells a story that is absent from most of our textbooks; the values he recounts are preserved today mostly in the monastic tradition, with its emphasis on the limits of wealth. Here are some of the limits placed on wealth by the early church as Gonzales enumerates them:

1. Lending money with interest is universally condemned;
2. In giving to the poor, a Christian is lending God's own money back to God;
3. Money is not evil but it should not be accumulated or loved for itself;
4. Private property is OK but it should not be abused;
5. One should keep for oneself only what is necessary for life and all the rest, which is superfluous, should be given to the poor,

Prayer

God of Corinth, Macedonia, Jerusalem and (your city) _____, thank you for these letters of Paul that show how you have been present with your church through the ages. Help us to make our congregations into communities where we challenge and accompany each other to be willing and eager to give. In your name, Amen. 
Emma Crossen the development director at the Courage Campaign. She studied ministry at Harvard Divinity School, and previously served Women of the ELCA as director for stewardship and development.

because all property ultimately belongs to God and we have done nothing to deserve it; money is a gift of grace;

6. To accumulate wealth is to pervert it, and to keep wealth is to be a thief.
7. Ten percent is the bare minimum that one must give; and, finally,
8. Some communities demanded that the rich give up all of their wealth to become Christian.

Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. (Wipf and Stock, 1990), pp. 226-229.

Questions for discussion

Which of these principles are ignored by today's wealth-oriented society, with its focus on an individual's ownership and use of private property?

Do any of these principles demand that poor people give out of their poverty?

Do these principles center on individual donors or are they more communal, as is Paul's appeal in 2 Corinthians?

Make the *Gather* Bible Study into a One-Day Retreat

by Audrey Novak Riley

Would you and your group consider organizing a one-day retreat using a *Gather* Bible study? In the past, many Women of the ELCA participants have enjoyed one-day retreats using the summer *Gather* Bible study (for 2015, that's "No Catchy Slogans," which appears in the June and July/August issues). And all three sessions of "No Catchy Slogans" are available for free download on our Website at www.gathermagazine.org.

A one-day retreat is a wonderful way to relax and enjoy fellowship with other women while studying Scripture. It can also help groups reach out to new participants, including younger generations of women. While many women have used the summer Bible study for a one-day retreat, the new shorter Bible study format means that other studies during the year could also lend themselves to this approach.

Audrey Novak Riley is director of stewardship and development for Women of the ELCA.



INTERESTED? HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR HOLDING YOUR EVENT:

- Choose a pretty place, if possible, such as the home of a devoted gardener, a local bed and breakfast, or a condo clubhouse with a patio.
- Invite women not only from your congregation, but from neighboring congregations. Don't forget the neighbors with whom we are in full communion: Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Reformed, Church in America, United Methodist, and Moravian.
- Organize light, healthy refreshments for your group. Share duties—let one person supply fruit; another one bring croissants or muffins; another one bring coffee and tea.
- Don't forget music. Each session suggests an opening and a closing hymn, all of which are printed in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Your pastor or music director might be able to help you get enough copies for everyone in attendance. If you have accompanists, line them up well in advance and let them know what the hymns are so they can prepare.
- Consider starting with breakfast and song before turning to Session 1. After you've enjoyed that, take a little coffee break and a stroll around the garden before opening up Session 2, "Waiting with Patience and Hope." After that, it's time for lunch! No hurry. Enjoy a leisurely lunch and a nice chat in the shade before coming back together for Session 3, "Power."
- If you can, stick around and have another strawberry or two on the porch before calling it a day. As you wave goodbye until next time, thank God for the blessings of sharing conversation, prayer, food, song, and God's word with friends old and new, all on a summer day.



REFLECT

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GRACE NOTES

Love and Legacies

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



A Lutheran financial planner once said something that has stuck with me for many years. She said that for any number of reasons, many of us find it challenging to tithe. But it's ever so easy to give 10 percent of our estate to some expression of the church – all it takes is one sentence in a will.

I think of that every time the churchwide organization of Women of the ELCA receives a bequest. Sometimes the gift represents 10 percent of the estate, a tithe. Other times, the gift our organization receives is the entire estate.

Ever since women in our country have been legally able to own and transfer property, women have made bequests to the church and to the women's organization of the church. Why? Estate giving is our final earthly act of stewardship, an opportunity to act on our values and interests as we hand on what has been entrusted to us during our lifetime.

Some bequests are an outright gift, no strings attached. Other times, a donor provides for an endowment fund with the estate gift and then designates how the income earned by the endowment fund should be used. The particular use might be general (such as “the ministry of Women of the ELCA”) or it might be specific (such as “scholarships for second-career seminarians”).

Several years ago, the churchwide organization received two large bequests in one year, prompting the churchwide executive board to establish a policy for handling such legacy gifts.

Under the policy, undesignated gifts

that are less than \$25,000 are used like other undesignated gifts to Women of the ELCA, in accordance with the churchwide organization's annual budget. For bequests of \$25,000 or more: 50 percent goes to the reserve fund of Women of the ELCA, and 10 percent goes to each of the following: Thankofferings, the Katie's Fund endowment, our scholarship fund, and our grants fund. The final 10 percent goes to a ministry selected by the churchwide executive board.

The distribution to the reserve fund helps prepare for those inevitable “rainy days.” Giving to Thankofferings, Katie's Fund, grants, and scholarships reflects the long-standing values of Lutheran women as together we support one another in our callings. Allowing the executive board to select a ministry when the gift arrives allows for flexibility in responding to needs that could not be anticipated when the policy was established.

This organization means so much to me that I have provided for a gift to Women of the ELCA in my own estate plan. I don't know what my estate will look like at the time of my death, but I do know that a portion of it will go to the organization that I believe in and have been privileged to serve.

Will you join me in making an estate gift to Women of the ELCA? Together, through our giving, we can ensure that future generations of Lutheran women will still be able to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Enough for All

by Catherine Malotky

If we all had the same, God, we wouldn't be having this conversation. If everyone had enough, if no one was hungry, homeless, or prevented from living in safe neighborhoods because of cost...or if no one lived in a war zone, on sub-marginal land, or in places without enough rain to grow food...or if no one had to work in the mines to feed their children, or leave their kids home alone after school because of child-care costs...if everyone had the contacts, education and intelligence/emotional quotient to get and hold a good job...if everyone had enough...

Sometimes I wish the Bible had been written from the vantage point of our world, with its market economy and 401k plans. I wish we had a clear picture of how you would navigate this, God, because it's confusing. How is our faith to show up in our check registers and credit card statements? How do we embody faith in our economic lives?

Jesus' mother, Mary, foreshadowed the path that would be his when she sang the Magnificat. She sang of reversals, of things turning upside down, of the poor having plenty and the rich going without. Her son did, indeed, call out the rich, the advantaged, those for whom the system worked. He didn't say they shouldn't have what they have. He said no one should be hungry; all should have enough. Jesus drew on the core values of his religious tradition—defend the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, because they do not have access to the economic system. They need a safety net. Why

would the tradition remind the people of Israel of this way of being? Because they were once on the outside, first as slaves and then as wanderers in a strange land.

Might this guide us, when many of us find ourselves well served by the economic system as it stands? Might we be called to see those for whom the system does not work as well, and then respond? Might this be the origin of our giving—a confession of faith that the body of Christ can only be healthy and whole when all members have enough?

Of course, none of us alone can bridge the gaps between haves and have-nots. Many of us, from a North American perspective, may see ourselves as among the 99 percent. But from a global perspective, most of us rise easily into the 1 percent. What we might see as modest wealth is staggering abundance for many in the world.

How shall we sort out what to give and what to retain? How shall we determine how much is enough for ourselves and our families? What context will shape our perspective? How would the world change if all had enough?

God, make us courageous to answer: "How much is enough?" Help us live into our faith tradition to include those who are otherwise excluded. Open our eyes to the abundance that surrounds us, and give us generous hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.

Spiritual Gifts



The women's Bible study group at Clemson University (left) uses the Women of the ELCA's spiritual gifts assessment (download this resource free at www.womenoftheelca.org). The Clemson group meets regularly to discuss faith and life topics in *Café* (www.boldcafe.org), the online magazine formed with young women.

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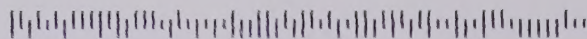
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